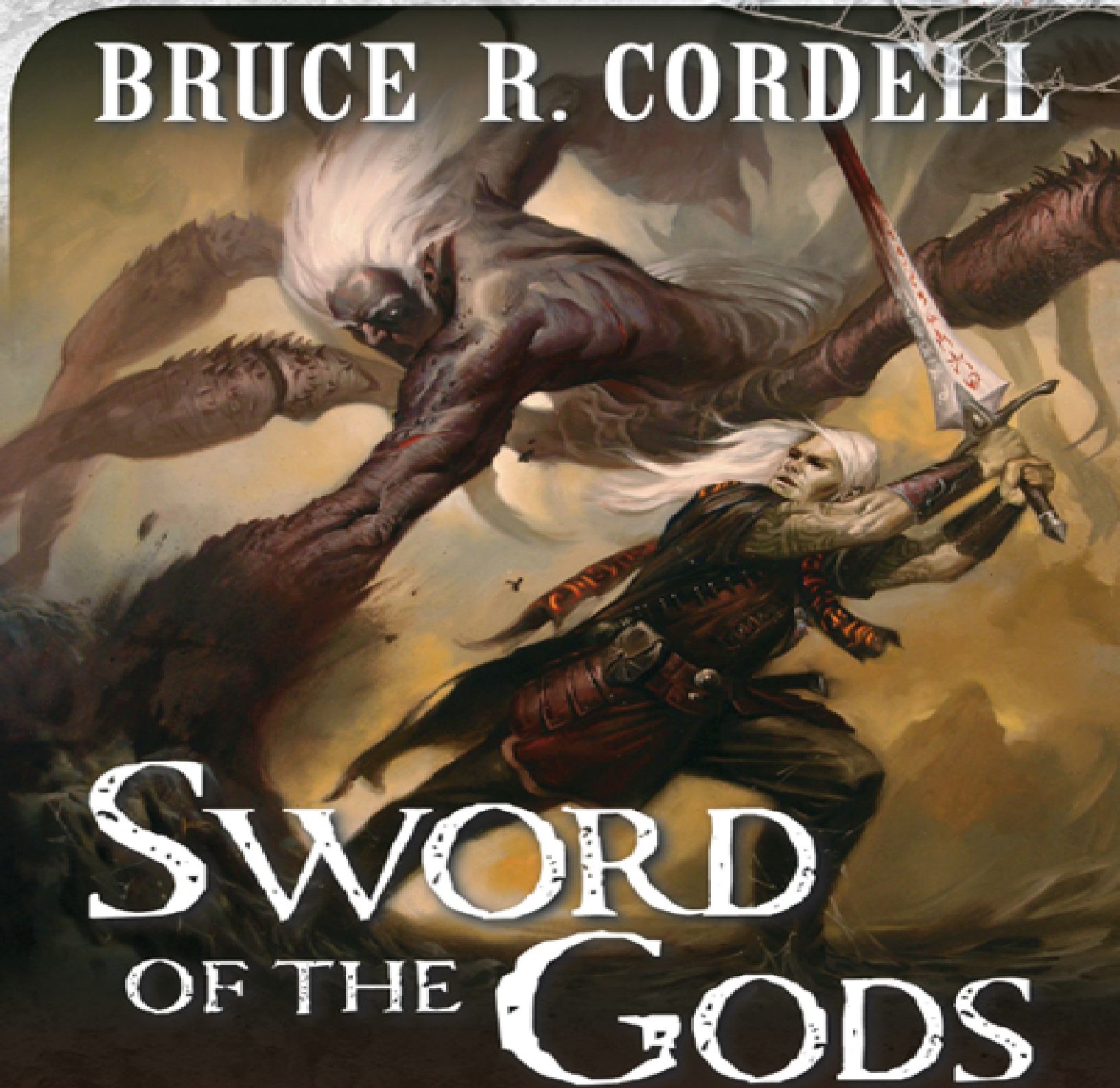
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Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous

enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE

CHAPTER ONE

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

16 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

One rainy evening, while Demascus was playing a game of tiles on his rooftop balcony, the memory of killing his lover returned. He was studying a game board that spelled out improbable actions, fiery emotions, and especially dubious curse words. The latter were courtesy of his absent opponent. He nodded thoughtfully, then laid down several square playing pieces, each carved with a single letter, to spell the word conspire across a space marked with crossed wands. That multiplied the value of his play by two … and he realized he'd just catapulted into the lead! When Riltana sees this, he thought, she's going to curse me out as a rat-hearted cheater. He grinned.

Riltana had a flare for laying down high-scoring words, probably thanks to the windsoul's colorful vocabulary. He'd discovered her talent a few months ago when she'd decisively beat him at a game that she said he "might find interesting." Since then, they'd set up each game on the roof. It was convenient for Riltana; she could drop in and make her play whether he was home or not.

Demascus was fascinated by tiles, despite the fact that Riltana trounced him five times out of six. It wasn't only that he enjoyed a challenge and anticipated the day his skill would rival his friend's. No, the real reason he couldn't get enough was because sometimes the words on the board unlocked splinters of memory.

For instance, CONSPIRE. *That* was a word to conjure with. The two syllables suggested a wanton trespass, a meeting high above an unsuspecting—

A gust of wind sprayed cold rain in his face. His chain of thought collapsed. “Shadow take it,” he muttered. He rubbed water out of his eyes. And just like that, the world went gray, as a recollection flung him somewhere else.



A woman stood in a hallway, her features soft in trembling candlelight. Her shoulders were bare and her eyes smoldered like distant storm clouds. Her name was Madri, and Demascus loved her.

He stood a few paces from her, and he wore only loose trousers, baring his elaborate ash-gray designs. The marks ran down his arms and across his back like the ghosts of tattoos. His bone-white hair was wet and his pale skin tingled from the bath.

“Coming to bed?” she asked, winding a curl of hair around one finger in languid circles.

His blood surged higher. It pounded in his temples like a drum. I can’t go through with this, he thought. I can’t …

“What’s wrong? You’ve been quiet all night. It’s not like you, Demascus.” Madri’s impish expression wavered.

“I took a new commission,” he said, his voice dull as a worn blade. “One I wish for all my lives I hadn’t accepted. If only I’d known who …”

“You accept commissions without knowing the target?”

“Sometimes.” Because whomever the gods choose always deserved death. And when had he ever refused? Never. Even …

Oh, Madri! What secrets do you keep? How awful they must be.

“You’re not frightened, surely,” she said, misreading his reticence. “If I’m to believe a quarter of your stories, even demigods fear your name, if they’re unlucky enough to learn it.” She laughed and came to him. Her scent, a sort of orange-peach fragrance with undertones of cedar, was

solace. He breathed it in for the last time. Then he took her supple shoulders in his hands.

"It's not that I'm afraid, Madri. I'm paralyzed by … grief. And I regret that it's come to this." Her arms went around his waist to draw him close. He slid his hands up from her shoulders, tracing the line of her neck until he cupped her head. "I'm sorry," he said. Even as she gazed at him with incomprehension, he gave a savage twist.



Pelting rain brought Demascus back to the rooftop patio. Water streamed down his hair, under his collar, and saturated his smallclothes. He was standing beyond the protection of the awning with no memory of having moved. And his throat was sore, as if he'd been screaming. The city lights were nebulous beneath the sleeting downpour, and the wind tugged at him with icy fingers. A few more steps and he'd pitch over the roof's edge. From somewhere below, a wailing child cried for its mother.

"Burning dominions," he whispered. What in the name of all the gods of shadow had he just witnessed? That woman—Madri—he'd seen her before. Images only, flashes of memory with no context. In each of these, she'd glared at him with naked animosity. Now he knew why.

One of his former incarnations had been snakehearted enough to kill his own lover. By all that's holy and sovereign, he thought, I'm a monster. I …

No, no—*I'm* not—that*wasn't* me! That was an earlier incarnation of me, not *me*. I'd never do that. He shook his head in accompaniment with his denial. The atrocity of the recollection was not his to claim. He'd never even imagine it!

Except … except he must have. He'd done more than consider committing such an atrocity. And if the reasons were irrefutable, who's to say he'd been wrong? Especially if a lord of creation commanded him. Disposing of those

selected by the gods had been his purpose. He was an instrument of fate, as he'd discovered when he pulled his blade from the mausoleum of his last life. What he had become, however, with his reduced abilities and incomplete memory, was disputable. If any of his former selves felt gnawing remorse over the vision of Madri, he doubted they could have long claimed the title Sword of the Gods.

The cold rain still streamed down. Rain dripped under his boot cuffs and pooled around his toes. Whatever else, he thought, I'm not the person who did that! That person … shared my name, that's all. If I believe otherwise, I'm only a stumble away from the sanatorium. It's time to stop rooting for memories. It can't be worth this.

Except that was a lie. Necessity required he continue striving to remember his previous lives. Learning all he'd once been, and everything he'd once done, was the only way to protect himself from a potential cavalcade of enemies he didn't even remember making. Enemies his previous selves had made, he corrected himself. That distinction mattered, if only to him. Unfortunately, the events of a few months ago had revealed that his enemies would continue to pursue him, life after life, incarnation after incarnation.

They weren't after his life; they were after his soul.

He stared up into the rain, as bleakness settled over him. Even if he jumped and smashed himself along the cliffside city below, it would be no escape. I'll just reform into a new mortal shell somewhere in a few years and lose all the progress I've gained this time around. Which was maybe what his worst enemy—his nemesis—intended. The Madri recollection might be the very thing Kalkan had manipulated him into recalling, thanks to the rakshasa's unholy knowledge of the future. The rakshasa, though dead, had proved to be the ultimate puppeteer. Perhaps Kalkan foresaw he'd kill himself in a fit of despair and so seal the fate of Demascus's next incarnation. Kalkan wanted to turn Demascus into an unforgiving fiend exactly like himself.

Why? But Kalkan would be out of the picture for a few more years, until the rakshasa returned to renew his blasted purpose …

Demascus glanced once more into the night, then stepped back from the edge. He gasped, after releasing a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His hands trembled as he recalled the touch of the woman's shoulders and the trust in her tumultuous eyes. Madri … Who were you? Is this awful vision all I will ever know about you? Probably. You're long dead, and have been for who knows how many years …

I need to leave Airspur. Maybe find someplace in Faerûn where none of my previous selves ever visited. Throw away the Veil, the sword, and start over completely—

Something dropped from the storm, tumbling out of control. It smashed right through the skylight he'd spent a small fortune installing. As the bark of shattering glass cut the air, he realized the shape had worn a black leather mask. It was Riltana!

Five figures arrowed down from the night, hot on the windsoul's trail. Four crashed through the shattered skylight, amid falling pieces of glass, rain, and his friend, landing in the living room. The fifth landed on the rooftop as easily as Riltana normally would, no worse for wear from a plunge off some higher city cliff or mote. The figure was gaunt, with colorless eyes. He gripped a black blade and wore gray leather without insignia or decoration.

"Who the Hells are you?" said Demascus.

"Your end."

CHAPTER TWO

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

16 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

THE GAUNT MAN ADVANCED ACROSS DEMASCUS'S ROOF.

Demascus sighed in relief. Sometimes fate was kind. He couldn't have asked for a more perfect distraction from the maelstrom battering his mind.

He relinquished confusion and regret; he wasn't even sure what he should feel guilty about. It was easier to let go. A familiar spike of joy in the face of drawn weapons shattered his doubt. This newcomer was about to discover the only ending on this night would be his.

The world slowed, making it seem like each raindrop was a distinct globule suspended in air. Even as Demascus's adversary tensed to attack, he seemed to freeze in place. The deva's hands itched for *Exorcessum*, but he'd had no reason to bring his blade to the roof. It was locked in a trunk under his cot. He really should keep his sword closer, especially after all the trouble he'd gone through to find it. But the weapon was so unwieldy. Even sheathing it on his back was awkward. How had his previous selves managed it? No matter. His current weapons included his Veil, which seemed to function only about half the time; and the single scroll-shaped charm woven into his hair—useful in conversations where lies were flying like crows—but not so much against swordplay.

And by the way the newcomer's tar-colored blade seemed to eat light, the weapon was enchanted with some kind of nasty surprise. Demascus swiveled side-wise toward his foe to bring one of his favorite weapons into play. His heel lashed, once into the man's stomach, a second time into his

neck, and finally where the stranger's fingers wrapped around the hilt of his blade. It was like kicking a bag filled with sodden earth, not flesh. But the sword came free. Demascus snatched it out of the air even as his foe's eyes dilated with pain. Or maybe just surprise. It didn't matter; Riltana was squaring off against four foes by herself in his living room.

A row of ghostly runes faded onto his borrowed blade in pale imitation of *Exorcessum's* designs. He hewed the intruder with the man's own sword, and the man dropped like a limp rag from the force of the blow, though no blood came. Demascus dismissed the attacker and gazed into the gaping hole in his skylight. A jagged shadow thrown up from a glass splinter offered a convenient path, so he stepped into its embrace. His next step was out of a different shadow, this one thrown by an overturned divan one level down.

Riltana was on her feet. Four adversaries ringed her, menacing the genasi with black iron weapons. One intruder was huge, another tiny, the third dressed all in yellow, and the last was a woman with painted red fingernails as long as daggers ... they all had the same feral, hungry look and colorless eyes with only tiny black circles to mark their irises. When the one in yellow screamed and leaped at Riltana, Demascus saw long incisors in her mouth. Vampires? He swallowed. He hoped not. He'd faced vampires before. At least, a previous version of himself had. Probably. Uncertainty made him hesitate.

Riltana dove beneath her opponent. Her adversary managed to score the back of her armor, but the windsoul came to her feet in one piece. She'd exchanged places with her attacker; the vampire stood in the center of the wrecked living room and Riltana's back was to a wall. Time jerked back to its too-rapid pace as he unwound the Veil from around his neck. The black iron weapons made him nervous. What if the one in his hand decided to betray him? The Veil

of Wrath and Knowledge would serve as a backup weapon if it came to it.

“Demascus, when you’re done standing there like a beer-addled tosser, maybe you could help?” Riltana yelled.

Oops. “You should’ve let me know you were bringing guests,” he replied. “I would’ve set more places.”

The woman with red dagger nails spun at the sound of his voice. Before she’d half turned, he stabbed her. The sword plunged to its hilt in her side, but the woman didn’t seem to mind. She snarled, “The thief has a friend. Kill them both! Retrieve what she stole!”

Demascus realized Riltana had filched from the wrong household. He wanted to tell the woman that he’d had no part in Riltana’s thievery. But before he could say anything, the red-nailed woman blurred forward and grabbed Demascus’s wrist. He gasped; her fingers were like ice. He released the sword and jerked back his hand. But she didn’t let go, and her eyes blazed with hypnotic power.

She whispered, “Blood. It tastes like danger. So sweet and thick …” She bent her head to his neck. He elbowed her in the face. If anything, she was more solid than the man on the roof, and her grip was a glacial manacle sucking away his body’s warmth, his vitality. If he didn’t get away, he’d collapse, drained of life. She wasn’t a pushover like the vampire on the rooftop.

With a cry of command he summoned a flare of divine light from his skin and clothing. The vampire flinched at the radiance, and he stepped across the room and down the hall within the woman’s wavering shadow. She’d feel differently once he retrieved *Exorcessum*—

“Watch out!” came Riltana’s warning from down the hallway.

Something bit him on the shoulder. He spun, spattering his own blood on the walls. The man he’d dispatched on the rooftop crouched there, his mouth red with Demascus’s flesh. Burning dominions, the thing had actually bitten him!

That couldn’t be good. He fought back the urge to shrug off his coat and examine the wound then and there in the hallway mirror. He wouldn’t know what to look for anyway—two holes where the incisors had gone in? Discoloration?

The female vampire stood a few steps behind him. When his eyes skittered across hers, she tried to catch him in a hypnotic trap. He averted his gaze.

The woman’s touch had hollowed his stomach like he’d eaten bad fish, and the expanding burn on his shoulder was worrisome. A regular bite would ache just the same, right? He realized … he was sort of afraid of vampires.

Stop it, he commanded. Remember who you are. Or, anyway, who you once were.

Demascus stood with one foot in light and one in shadow. He recalled how his friend Chant remarked awhile ago that a deva could draw his strength from either, and that on the whole, Chant preferred the light.

Demascus, however, reveled in the dark. He shook out the Veil, throwing a shadow into a plane few could see. That gloom fell across the vampire like an immaterial shroud, and through its gauzy lens all of the vampire’s strengths and weaknesses were made plain. Seven points of pale light flickered through the creature’s body. Their gleams revealed to him a creature animated by necrotic vigor. An undead was stronger, faster, and more resistant to hurt than living flesh, and its wounds would mend supernaturally quickly. But it wasn’t invulnerable. The root of the vampire’s power lay in the bottommost point of illumination, which pulsed red like spilled blood. In that flicker, Demascus discovered what he should have known all along.

The vampire would burn away instantly in full sunlight; too bad he was fresh out of sunshine. Of course, he wielded the next best thing: the radiance of the gods’ wrath.

But without his sword to channel it, his options were limited. He could try the same thing he’d—

The male vampire lunged, arms out, to ensnare the deva in a wrestler's grapple. Demascus made no move to stop him. The bloodsucker pulled the deva close to its chest, baring Demascus's neck. The deva whispered an oath of light. His voice was a quill that scrawled a burning mark of divine brilliance, the promise of destruction. The mark erupted, and the vampire blew apart in gobbets of golden illumination, sizzling gore, and a smell of decay so pungent Demascus gagged. Weren't they supposed to turn to grave mist and slink away? He was pretty sure that was the case. But he'd touched something of his deeper power, accidentally, when he'd called the light. That undead wouldn't be coming back in any fashion whatsoever.

The back splatter of radiance and burning flesh had caught the female vampire nearby. She screamed as smoking holes marred her previously flawless skin. Her scream bubbled to a sigh as she transformed into a pillar of mist. Ha! he thought, I knew it! Mist!

Thuds, scrapes of metal on stone, and Riltana's curses echoed down the hallway from the living room, muted by the grave vapor. Demascus checked his instinct to plunge through the roiling bank to Riltana's aid. Though she faced three all alone, he still hadn't retrieved his best weapon! And what if the red-nailed vampire re-formed around him as he rushed through?

He flung open his bedroom door and dove for the long chest containing his sword. As he worked the latches, he heard Riltana scream in equal parts fury and pain. "Hold on!" he yelled, clicking the last latch open.

"What're you doing back there, having a lie down?" came her muffled reply. He could tell by the hoarse timbre in her voice that she was desperate. Demascus snatched up his sword. The cross guard was an intricate affair of opposing styles, as if the smith had managed to forge two or three weapons into a single whole. Nearly as long as two regular blades laid end to end, it still felt light as a switch of hazel

wood in his hands. The sword trembled, and for a moment he saw … Madri, the woman he'd killed!

Demascus opened his mouth in surprise. He wanted to tell her he was sorry for what his previous self had done, to explain that he wasn't that person anymore.

But the image blurred away, leaving him alone.

A shattering crash broke his paralysis. He launched out of his room and down the hall, holding *Exorcessum* before him. The enigmatic runes, scarlet down one side, porcelain on the other, gleamed with secret magic he hadn't quite puzzled out. But some visceral part of him recognized the touch of the hilt and the sword's balance. Dangerous, wild, uncontrollable joy filled him again as he returned to the fray.

A tangle of mist curled up and out of the hole in the ceiling. It could have been the scarlet-nailed vampire or the one Riltana had bested while he'd been gone, because the one wearing yellow had disappeared; only two foes remained.

One was the hulking genasi vampire wielding a hammer of black iron. The other was little more than a child, darting in and out of range of Riltana's knife and whirling a short sword.

"Riltana, why're there vampires in my home?"

She said, voice tight, "They're just stray dogs. Followed me here." Then she fended off a hissing attack from the smaller one. Riltana was dressed in the black leather and face mask she wore to hide her identity and provide protection while she acquired things that didn't belong to her.

"So you're filching from vampires now?" he asked.

Before Riltana could answer, the large one came at Demascus with a swiftness that belied its hulking frame. It'd probably been an earthsoul before undeath lightened its skin to a shade nearly as stark as the deva's own. The hammer came around, scribing an arc that would connect with his head. He brought up his sword and deflected the

strike, but the impact nearly ripped *Exorcessum* from his hands. The thing was strong, even for an already preternaturally powerful vampire.

The deva considered his options … which felt an awful lot like grasping at straws blowing in the wind. It was at times like these that he wished, more than ever, he had the artifact called the Whorl of Ioun. It was the key to recovering his true powers. For instance, he knew he could call forth divine radiance; he'd just blown the one in the hallway to tatters. But as he reached for that same divine brightness again, he found only a void. What the Hells?

"So," he said instead, "Riltana, why don't you just give back whatever you stole, and maybe they'll leave?"

The windsoul shook her head and frowned. "Hey! I didn't take anything! I just peeked at some artwork in their private gallery. Who knew they'd get so upset over a drop-in art critic?"

The small one hissed, "She's a thief! She must die for her trespass."

Riltana chose that moment to execute a pirouette, extending her sword high and steel-toed boot low. The vampire wisely ducked the sword, so the windsoul's boot swept the little thing's feet. Only its supernatural reflexes saved it from falling flat on its back.

Part of him wanted to chastise the windsoul for bringing the attack on herself, and by extension his home. But most of him was glad he had something to kill, to take his mind off … things. And if anything needs killing, he thought, it's vampires. Killing *again*, anyway.

The big one whirled his hammer over his head, then changed the weapon's trajectory mid-swing, again showing off immense strength. The hammer came straight down and caught Demascus by surprise, clipping his right shoulder. The pain was shattering.

Something woke to the agony, rising up from a hidden reserve of his soul. A scarlet sun rose over the horizon of his

consciousness, and everything was different. He forgot about Riltana, about whether or not she'd taken something from these vampires, and about his own lack of culpability. He felt bathed in purpose. He wanted to move. To act. To slay.

He grinned at the hulking creature of the night before him. Of its own volition, one hand relinquished *Exorcessum's* hilt, gathered a clot of shadow from thin air, and threw it like a dart into the vampire's forehead. The creature shivered, then ceased to move as it strained against the immaterial barb pinning it to the air.

Demascus laughed. With the casual ease of an executioner, he lopped the vampire's head from its shoulders. The creature withered to impotent mist and dispersed. His glee redoubled, as if he'd downed a couple of fiery shots of whiskey and anticipated a couple more. The sound of heavenly horns sounded distantly in his mind.

He turned his gaze to the last visible foe. It had scuttled away from Riltana and clung like a spider to the living room ceiling at the lip of the shattered skylight. The thief had apparently missed its departure, because she was casting about for her foe behind the remnants of living room furnishings.

"Face me," Demascus intoned, his voice resonant with power. He pointed *Exorcessum* at his adversary.

The vampire's head swiveled all the way around to stare directly down at him. Its eyes sought to burrow into the deva's mind. This time Demascus didn't look away. The compulsion in the white-eyed stare broke on his mind like a straw of sugar fluff. This sniveling child-monster was a joke for someone like him—he was the Sword of the Gods!

He stared back at the vampire and said, "You should never have come here. You've sealed your fate." He flicked the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge. Its parchment-pale length unfurled with a snap, and the far end wrapped around the vampire's left foot. The small creature shrieked as Demascus yanked it

off the ceiling. Its right arm snapped when it hit the ground at the deva's feet. He stomped a boot down on the broken arm, riveting the creature in place. It was a child, in truth—a firesoul boy aged about thirteen winters—turned to undeath. He had become an abomination. He snarled and tried to scramble away, but Demascus just pressed harder. Surprise, quickly replaced by abject fear, washed across the creature's face as it realized something more than the deva's weight trapped it. Demascus was actively preventing it from turning into escaping mist with his stare alone.

"You see?" Demascus said. "I am fate's agent. You can't elude me. Because your thread ends now." He dragged his sword through the creature's body, releasing a pulse of the same light that illuminates the heavenly domains. The vampire burned to a human-shaped silhouette of ash in a heartbeat. No hint of grave vapor remained.

"Who's next?" Demascus asked, and his gaze fixed on the only remaining person in the room.

The windsoul's eyes widened. She raised a hand and said, "Hey! Wake up, idiot! Remember me? Your friend, Riltana, the friendly genasi?"

What was the windsoul going on about? Of course he knew who she … oh. The red glaze of murderous euphoria leaked away like steam off a too-hot mug of tea. With it went his momentary familiarity with a staggering suite of avenging prayers and assassin's tricks. In the absence of his manic rapture, the room seemed duller, cluttered, and all too real. Is this how he normally lived in the world? And his shoulder still hurt where the vampire had bit him. He rubbed it and winced.

"What just happened?" he said. Events of the previous few moments were foggy and disconnected, like a dream. Hopefully he hadn't done anything too embarrassing. But as he let the tip of his sword fall, he guessed that was a forlorn hope.

He cleared his throat and said, “Don’t worry—I’m me again.”

Riltana laughed, somewhat nervously, and said “Demascus … sometimes you scare the living shit out of me.”

CHAPTER THREE

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

16 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Riltana rubbed her chin and studied Demascus.

Was he still possessed by the memory of killer incarnations, or was he back in the land of the sane? Shadow had swirled around him like dark wings while his eyes had become two radiant stars, the shape of peril personified.

Demascus had destroyed the last two vampires with no more effort than she would've needed to swat flies, while exhibiting palpable joy. A moment earlier, he'd barely been able to stand toe-to-toe with these creatures. He'd obviously touched a fragment of his previous self, however briefly. She'd seen him do it only twice before. He only ever managed it by accident. But when he was able to call it up, the visage of the Sword of the Gods was terrifying. When his attention had fallen on her like a coffin weighted with bricks, she'd considered fleeing. Then the shadow had dispersed and the celestial glow of his eyes dulled to nothing, revealing the man—actually, the deva—she'd come to know the last several months as her friend.

"Back to being not entirely crazed?" she asked, forcing a certain casual lassitude into her voice.

He blinked a few times, then said in a deadpan tone. "Riltana, I told you last time; if you're going to stop by unannounced, the least you could do is bring dinner, too."

She laughed, louder than she'd intended. That was the Demascus she knew. She righted a side table and said, "I owe you for more than a few dishes this time."

“Yeah. You’re moving into the territory of real coin.” He fumbled with his sword, trying to sheath it in a half scabbard strapped to his back. Finally he snorted and laid it on the floor. He draped his wrap in a casual loop around his neck, letting both ends hang low.

The scarf—the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge—was how she’d first met Demascus. She’d stolen it from him in front of Chant’s curio shop. Demascus and Chant tracked her down to get it back. A lucky thing, or she’d probably be dead in the caverns below Akanawater Falls.

Little seemed to get Demascus down for long, even his own absent past. His unflagging humor made it easy to call him a friend. That and the sad fact that with Carmenere gone, Riltana could count on one hand the number of people who’d put up with her. Though he sometimes frightened her so badly she thought she would pee her leathers, she knew she could count on him in a tight spot.

“Well?” he said. “Are you going to explain why rain is falling into my living room? I liked that skylight.”

On the other hand, even the most accepting friend eventually finds a limit.

“It’s not what it looks like,” she began, then stopped as a yawn caught her mid-sentence. Gods, it was late. She wanted to collapse into a senseless heap. But Demascus deserved an answer. Just maybe not the whole answer …

“What it looks like,” Demascus said, “is vampires. Where in the name of all the gods of shadow did you find bloodsuckers in Airspur?” As he talked, he carefully rubbed one shoulder, which was spattered with blood, and winced.

“I had no idea they were vampires, I swear! I thought I was visiting some prissy noble’s home.”

“Visiting? Or something else?”

She gave an exasperated shake of her head. “All right, yeah, I was sneaking in. I got a lead. Do you remember the painting of Queen Cyndra that went missing?”

“I might be able to bring it to mind,” he replied dryly.

Of course. She'd related the story every time she had a little too much to drink. She'd wanted to surprise her friend, Carmenere, by commissioning new paintings in the same style as the famous portrait of Queen Cyndra. Cyndra was the first queen of Akanûl and mother of Queen Arathane, Carmenere's royal aunt. This had required that she borrow the Cyndra painting for a few days as reference for the artist she'd hired. It would've been perfect. It should've been. Carmenere should have been thrilled beyond words …

But it hadn't gone down like that. Her leech-fondling "friend" Threneth ran off with the canvas, leaving her in the lurch! Instead of presenting Carmenere with a gift that would've blown the woman's stockings off, Riltana had come off as complicit in the theft of a one-of-a-kind painting of a beloved regent of Akanûl.

Carmenere hadn't believed her protests of innocence.

The worst thing was, had she been in Carmenere's place, she doubted she would've acted any differently.

"Well," she finally continued, "like I said, a hot lead fell in my lap. I got a tip the painting was gathering dust in House Norjah here in Airspur. So I went to take a look."

"House Norjah?"

"Kasdrian Norjah is a merchant lord who bought his noble title years ago. Word is he and his house deals mostly in old books and scrolls. And they make out damn well supplying parchment and inks to the Crown, the Bibliotheca, and to a few wizardly guilds that go through that kind of stuff like nobody's business."

"So—you broke into House Norjah. Did you find the painting?"

"No. Just a bunch of sheep-straddling vampires! Whom I had the misfortune to disturb. I fled, but they followed. And they were fast! All of them, even the ones who didn't used to be windsouls before they … um …"

Demascus nodded, and finally let loose with a prodigious yawn of his own. "Well, we beat them for at least a day,

assuming they can make it back to the grave dirt that spawned them before sunup.”

“How do you know that?”

He nodded, “Just one of the few fragments I do remember.” He shrugged.

“Good. Let’s hope they lose their way home, then,” she said. “Anyway, it’s time for me to go. I’m sorry—”

“If they recognized you, they probably sent someone to your loft. No, safer if you stay here tonight. I have a guest room that’s not smashed up, unless you were here earlier and I didn’t notice.” He smiled. “Plus, I want your help cleaning up this mess tomorrow.”

She almost told him everything then. But she was tired. And after all, that could wait until morning, too.

“All right,” she said, “And thanks.”

“Sure,” he said. His gaze fell to the shoulder he was still massaging, where he’d been wounded. “I’m sort of worried about this bite—do you think I’ll wake up a vampire?”

Demascus, a vampire? A scary thought! “You’re the vampire expert,” she said.

“Hmm, right.” He thought for a bit, then said, “Well, I’m probably all right. I expect you’d have to be fairly weak-minded to fall under a vampire’s sway with just a single wound.”

“Couldn’t hurt to put some ointment on the bite,” Riltana said, “or take some healing elixir, if you’ve got any.”

He nodded. “Good idea.” Then his shoulders slumped. He let out a long breath. “And before I forget, tomorrow I have something I want to … ask you about. Something unpleasant I remembered right before you and your new friends showed up.”



Morning shrugged off night’s dim embrace. Airspur disgorged a colorful populace across suspended streets and floating plazas. The hooded figure crossing Sapphire Bridge

was just one of the many early risers in Airspur. Her stride was confident but not swaggering, determined but not hurried. It wouldn't do to draw attention, so her hood hid her distinctive features. Her leather armor, scuffed and scarred, looked ordinary enough on casual inspection. She'd furled her cloak and coerced her crystalline spear to the opacity of dull wood. She'd taken one additional step to protect her anonymity. The circle she'd scribed on her forehead with spellbound chalk was enchanted. While it lasted, most simply ignored her, or if they saw her, they soon forgot about it, unless she spoke to them.

No one who saw her would have any reason to suspect she was their ruler.

The hardest part had been getting out of the palace without her royal bodyguard. It wasn't a trick she could pull often, lest it be discovered. The elite detachment of peacemakers assigned as her protectors took their duties seriously. If they discovered she was out and about without them, the individuals stationed outside her door would be punished by their superiors, no matter her royal decree. As long as she was back in her palace rooms before anyone gathered the temerity to check on Queen Arathane, it would be all right. She had some time.

The home she sought was in a neighborhood high along the cliffs, which meant it was upscale by most standards. It even had a small, attached courtyard shielded from the street by a stone wall and a gate. The gate was not latched. She pushed through and walked the short flagstone path to the front door. The courtyard was littered with pots containing all manner of plants, only a few of which seemed distressed. Someone had a green thumb.

"Who're you?" came a soft voice.

Arathane whirled. The courtyard had been vacant when she entered. Yet a human woman stood there in swirling green finery with eyes as stormy as any genasi's. She gave off a scent akin to citrus and cedar.

Arathane said, “I apologize; I hope I haven’t mistaken the address. I’d heard a man named Demascus had taken residence here. I need to speak with him. Are you the householder?”

The stranger looked Arathane up and down, suggesting with a curl of her lip that she didn’t much care for what she saw. Arathane was unused to such insolent behavior. She was halftempted to pull her hood down to see what this odd woman thought of her then. Of course, compromising her anonymity to put the woman in her place wouldn’t be wise.

Instead she said, “It doesn’t matter whether you’re the householder or the gardener. If he’s here, please let Demascus know that an envoy of the Crown has a message for him.”

The woman laughed, and shook her head as if in wonderment. She said, “I’m not a messenger—or anything—any longer, and certainly not for the likes of you.”

Arathane frowned, wondering if the woman had pierced her disguise, and if so, what the woman hoped to gain by provoking her. The queen decided not to give the stranger the satisfaction of a response. She turned back to the door, grabbing the brass knocker, and rapped on the plate. When she glanced back to see the woman’s reaction, the stranger was gone.



Demascus finished sweeping up the last shards of skylight glass. With the broken furniture removed, the living room only looked halfwrecked. The wood floor was still damp, and only two chairs and a coffee table remained intact. Not to mention the gaping hole in the ceiling. He’d have to get someone to fix that before the next storm. Much as he’d enjoyed the extra light from the skylight, maybe the fixture was the wrong choice, given Riltana’s proclivities. He studied the windsoul, the artist of his misfortune. She was wringing towels into a bucket. Riltana’s high-flying style was

usually something Demascus appreciated without remorse. But she'd never let vampires into his home before.

"Riltana, we need to deal with this. Maybe we should visit House Norjah and try to make nice," he said. "I'd rather not find surprise visitors with fangs in my home again."

She nodded glumly and gave her cloth another twist, forcing out a last trickle of water. "Yeah. I just wish they'd had the damn painting I was looking for."

His mouth quirked. That was the only apology he was likely to get. Ah, well. He said, "Did they have any paintings?"

"Yeah. Interesting ones, too …" She glanced at him sidelong, as if she was hiding something. Before he could tell her to spill it, she said, "Listen. What'd you want to tell me last night? You said you'd remembered something? Something you wanted to ask me about?"

Oh, right. He wished he hadn't said anything at all. He'd awoken that morning resolved to put the horrendous vision out of his mind. The best thing he could do was to treat the image as just one more of a thousand crazy memory fragments with no bearing on his new life in Akanûl. Plus, the windsoul had tried to change the topic.

"I'll tell you about it after we get this mess straightened out. Let's concentrate on House Norjah. Starting with who gave you this hot lead about a painting?"

Riltana looked at him with a stubborn set to her jaw. She recognized the brush-off. But he didn't feel like explaining to Riltana how one of his former selves had taken out a contract on his lover. It was too appalling.

Riltana said, "All right. Awhile ago I asked Chant to put out the word I was looking to purchase the painting of Cyndra, no questions asked, of any art collector who'd lately 'happened' upon the canvas. A couple of days ago, a human showed up with a tip."

"A human? There're only so many in Airspur. What was your contact's name?"

Someone knocked on the door before she could answer. Demascus yelled, “Who is it?”

“An envoy of the Crown, here to speak with Demascus on royal business,” came the muffled reply.

“The Crown?”

“Yes—the queendom has an appeal.”

“Open the door!” hissed Riltana. “Remember how much we got paid last time?”

He hushed the windsoul and went to the entrance. Chant’s cat Fable had appeared at the knock and now loitered near the exit. She pretended no interest in the situation. Demascus wasn’t fooled. Fable was boarding while Chant’s pawnshop was closed. Though the cat had proved a reasonable houseguest, she usually tried to bolt outside at the least opportunity. Lucky for Fable she hadn’t gotten underfoot last night.

Demascus opened the door. A tall woman in a hood stood in the opening. She gazed around the room, then looked up. “What’s wrong with your roof?”

Without the door to muffle it, Demascus was struck by how familiar the voice was. “Do I know—”

The figure drew her hood back. Demascus’s jaw dropped. The person outlined in the golden light of the rising sun was Queen Arathane. He’d recalled their first meeting more than once. The queen’s magnificent white gown had left her lavender-hued arms and shoulders bare and showed off the silvery lines that traced her arms and throat and spiraled her cheeks. She’d worn her hair as a bundle of crystalline braids on which rested a white circlet of rulership. The memory was indelibly inked into his brain.

That morning Arathane was dressed the same as when they’d cleaned the last vestiges of the abyssal plague from beneath the Firestorm Cabal’s motherhouse. Her stiff hair was pulled back in a simple braid. She wore no crown. And yet … to Demascus she was as stunning as she’d been in that first encounter.

Her gaze locked on his, holding him in place. She coughed and said, “Are you going to ask me in, or just stand staring?”

Merciful lords, get hold of yourself, he thought. “By all means, welcome. You caught me off guard. Sorry about the mess. I’m in the middle of … redecorating.” Apparently he hadn’t stifled his infatuation with Arathane as well as he’d hoped. Damn it!

The queen entered, but paused just inside the doorway. She glanced again at the damp floor and piled furniture with a lift of an eyebrow, then nodded at Riltana.

Demascus wondered if he was dreaming. The queen of Akanûl? In his home? Looking at her made him feel breathless, which was a surprise. He hadn’t seen her in months. Seeing her now, he realized something was familiar about her. She reminded him of someone. Someone he’d just seen, actually … By all the gods of light and shadow, Arathane was as tall as the woman of his vision last evening! And she had the same stormy eyes …

“Have you heard anything I’ve said?” Arathane inquired. Demascus realized the monarch had been talking. For how long, while he’d stood like an idiot? He closed his open mouth.

“Snap out of it, Demascus,” Riltana said. “You can moon over her anytime.”

Damn the windsoul for putting such an embarrassing face on his discomfiture. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get much sleep last night. Riltana showed up late with unexpected guests, and I’m afraid things got a little unruly.”

The queen chuckled. “Sounds fun. Though I sense you’re not telling me everything. I’m sorry I disturbed you with no forewarning. And it *is* good to see you again.”

He felt his mouth stretch into a goofy smile. His body didn’t give a shadow’s scream about his resolve to eradicate the queen from his thoughts. “What were you saying? I promise I’ll pay attention this time.”

“I was wondering about your gardener, or maybe your householder, whom I met outside?”

“I don’t have a gardener,” Demascus said dumbly. “But I got this lease from a dwarf who smells like fried onions. Is he out there?”

“No dwarf. A human woman. It’s not really important, but she was quite rude.”

He glanced into the courtyard. Empty.

Fable made a try for freedom. He slammed the door before the cat could slip out. Fable sniffed as if to say, “I didn’t really want out,” and sauntered away, tail straight up.

“She’s gone now,” Demascus said. “I hope it wasn’t one of our, um, unexpected guests from last night come back to check on things.”

Riltana gave him a skeptical expression and said, “They’re not really known as early risers.”

Oh, right. He glanced at the queen. The monarch had no doubt run into streets filled with strangers on her way to his house. Her identity hidden, he doubted anyone had called her Your Majesty or made allowances a ruler might be used to. Except the queen didn’t strike him as someone who’d remark on a passing commoner’s inability to pierce her disguise. Which meant someone particularly noteworthy really had been loitering—

Arathane waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter; I was only trying to make small talk. I came here for a more serious reason.”

“Would you like some tea or coffee?” Demascus blurted. He realized he was falling woefully short of being a good host. He was used to Riltana’s and Chant’s visits, and of course Fable’s extended stay. The thief was unimpressed with social niceties and had never once gotten her nose out of joint over not being offered a place to sit or a refreshment. The cat cared only that she was fed on a regular schedule. But a queen! She was probably—

“Don’t bother; I have to get back before the bells strike the next hour.”

“At least have a seat,” Demascus said, and gestured to one of the two chairs that hadn’t been smashed. “Then I’m guessing you’ll explain the serious reason that brought you here without a royal escort.”

Arathane sat with a dancer’s ease on the edge of the chair. Demascus pulled up the other chair, and Riltana brought a stool from the kitchen. The queen glanced at Riltana and said, “I’m sorry things didn’t work out between you and my niece. With Carmenere’s new diplomatic position in Tymanther, I expect you don’t get to see much of each other.”

Riltana colored, and said, “No, we don’t.” The topic was a sore one for Riltana. Demascus had learned not to mention the silverstar. The thief had driven her friend away by exploiting Carmenere’s link with the queen, and, through that link, access to the palace and a certain painting.

“I’m sorry,” said Arathane with complete sincerity.

Riltana nodded, managing a smile. “But that’s also not the reason I’m here,” the Queen said. “And to answer your question, Demascus, if my regular escort was with me, I wouldn’t have come to you. It’s not seemly that I openly hire ‘outside contractors’ to deal with issues of state. But the trundling wheels of bureaucracy sometimes fail to keep up with a rapidly evolving situation. And the Firestorm Cabal still has a way to go to earn my trust …” She shook her head.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t trust a Firestormer as far as I could fling a dead rat,” said Riltana.

The queen nodded. “Essentially. So, in the meantime—”

“You want to hire us for something dangerous,” Demascus suggested. “Great. I’m in.”

Riltana smacked him on the shoulder. “Some bargainer you are.”

“I’m sure Her Majesty will pay us a fair commission for whatever she has in mind,” he replied, grinning. “Go on,

Your Highness.”

She returned his smile, and it was like the sun had come out. “Something’s happened to Akanûl’s arambarium mine. All contact was severed six days ago. We’ve dispatched two separate teams of elite peacemakers; neither has returned. Reports about possible causes are sparse, conflicted, and seem almost designed to panic the Stewards. I’m afraid, based on essentially no real intelligence that the Stewards are going to do something incredibly foolish, like blockade the Bay of Airspur and then declare war on Tymanther!”

“Hold on. What’s arambarium?”

“Arambarium is—”

“And why would the Stewards—and you, presumably—declare war on another sovereign nation over it?”

“Because,” said the queen, “Tymanther and Akanûl have never been—”

“And what’s Tymanther’s connection to arambarium?”

Arathane held up her hands. “Stop! I’ll answer your questions. But only if you stop interrupting me.”

“Sorry,” said Demascus. He put his finger to his lips and gave Riltana a look. The windsoul rolled her eyes, but nodded.

Arathane took a deep breath and settled farther back into her chair. She said, “Arambarium is an extraordinarily rare mineral. It looks like polished silver in its natural state. Those with an interest in such things have long recognized the mineral as inherently magical and as a possible component in a variety of rituals. However, a few decades ago Akanûl war wizards secretly discovered that the power locked within even a single grain of arambarium was far greater than anyone previously realized. More than that—arambarium is uniquely tuned to elemental and primordial magic. Used as a component, arambarium could enable spells of air, earth, fire, and water and other violent energies to be stepped up by orders of magnitude! A warship with an arambarium-alloyed keel can cut through the sea much

more quickly. A staff of fire wrapped in arambarium thread could rain down destruction on an entire neighborhood. And a genasi soldier outfitted with an arambarium-laced harness is one few would dare to cross swords with."

"Well backstab me and call me a rat's aunt," said Riltana in a reasonable tone. Demascus shushed her.

"But as I said," continued Arathane, "arambarium is rarer even than the most exotic spice. We know of only a single deposit in all Faerûn—the mine my mother secretly established just off Akanûl's coast. In the decades since we've been extracting the mineral, only a few precious pounds have been dug out from tiny, meandering veins. Then, a few months ago, we found the mother lode."

Demascus lifted an eyebrow.

"The arambarium we'd been mining up to this point is nothing compared to what the miners stumbled upon in a deep cavern. The Stewards were making plans to exploit the new find when … everything went dark."

"What's the Tymanther connection?" said Riltana. "What would the dragonborn care, even if they knew about it?"

Demascus interjected, "I doubt *any* rival nation would be happy learning that its neighbor just found a way to dramatically upgrade its military power."

"That's what the Stewards believe, and that Tymanther has taken action," said Arathane. "For no good reason! It's all rumor derived from speculation based on zero evidence. We need to confirm whether Tymanther really is our enemy in this matter. If so, attacking our mine … is an act of war."

"Huh," said Arathane.

"But if they're not responsible," the queen continued, "our misguided response could cause a war where none was needed, while whoever's really responsible for depriving us of our arambarium supply continues unchecked."

"You need someone to find out what's actually going on at the mine," said Demascus.

The queen nodded, “And report back, which is demonstrably harder than it sounds. We need clear intelligence before we devise a response. A bungled policy could do more damage than no policy at all.”

“You said you’ve already sent peacemakers?” Riltana asked.

“Yes. Not to mention a special team of spies hand-picked by the Steward of Earth. But we’ve heard nothing. The mine is a blind spot. Not knowing what’s going on there is a like a tumor in the underbelly of Akanûl.”

“Where’s the mine?” said Demascus. “You said it was off the coast? Give me landmarks to steer by, and I’ll see what’s going on.” Anticipation of finding trouble made his heart beat faster. Or maybe it was just Arathane’s presence. He couldn’t be sure. He also suspected he was being more than a little rash.

“Hold on!” said Riltana. “I’m expert at sneaking into places—you need me along, too. But I don’t work for free. Neither does Demascus, except he’s too polite to remind you.”

“You’ll be compensated,” said Arathane. “And you’ll have my thanks, if you succeed.”

Riltana shook her head. “More coin I don’t need. What I do need …” The woman dropped her head, then looked up again. “All I would like is a small favor. Could you … could you tell Carmenere that I’ve agreed to help you? And that I’m thinking of her? Since she took that diplomatic post in High Imaskar, I’ve lost track of her. And I …”

The queen considered a moment, then said. “I will. In the next diplomatic courier package the Court of Majesty sends east, I’ll include a personal letter and make sure Carmenere sees it.”

Riltana smiled shyly. Demascus blinked. He’d seen the windsoul knocked unconscious by a goblin sneak, nearly ripped in two by a rakshasa assassin, and curse a streak so foul that he was certain the gods themselves blushed. This was the first time he’d ever seen Riltana vulnerable.

Demascus cleared his throat and said, “Anything else you can tell us, Your Highness? Even an insignificant hint could help us prepare. In my business, preparation is usually key.” He was glad she didn’t immediately ask him what his business was. She probably wouldn’t like the idea that he could sometimes call on the half-forgotten skills of a master assassin.

Arathane shook her head, then stopped and raised a hand, “You know, there *is* something. Not much, but … a peacemaker report a few months ago came to the Steward of Earth’s attention, and he mentioned it to me. I didn’t think anything about it at the time. Something about trouble on the wharf, in one of the warehouses shippers use to store cargo. Warehouse … fourteen? The detail that stands out in my mind is how, despite that shipyard workers reported sounds of a bloody conflict inside, when the peacemakers showed up, there was no evidence of anything amiss.”

“And how’s that connected with the mine?” said Riltana.

The queen shrugged and said, “On the same day, the speaking stone on the island went dead for almost an entire bell before we reestablished communication. We never did find out what caused it. Anyway, the phantom conflict in the warehouse and the speaking stone lapse occurred near the same time. Could be just a coincidence. I haven’t given it a moment’s thought until now.”

Demascus said, “We’ll run by the warehouse when we book passage out to the island. Speaking of which—where exactly is the mine?”

She stood and produced a parchment from her belt pouch. “The coordinates. What’s written here is a state secret.”

“It’s safe with us,” said Demascus. He reached for the parchment, but she took his hand before he pulled away.

She said, “Be careful, Demascus. We never did find time to have our chat. When you return, hopefully with news less dire than a Tymanther aggression on Akanûl soil, let’s remedy that.”

“Uh, that … that would be good,” he managed to respond.

“Yes,” said the queen. “I suspect it will be.” She released his hand, nodded to him and the windsoul, and departed his house.

Demascus was off balance too much to open the door for the monarch of Akanûl, so he just watched her back recede as she walked across his yard. She cut quite a figure …

He slammed the door as Fable slunk up. “I’m too quick for you, cat,” he said. When he finally turned back to Riltana, he saw she was grinning, all signs of vulnerability gone from her face.

“What?” he asked.

“Could you be any more transparent?”

“What’re you talking about? I—”

She shook her head. “Even a half-wit could see it. Damn, for someone so normally put together, you’re like a starving dog in a butcher shop whenever she’s around.”

Demascus chuckled. “It’s *that* obvious?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid it is.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

17 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Riltana flew among the hovering citymotes. The wind caressed her like a lover's arms. It bore her up when she asked, but only for a breath, before gently letting go.

She paused on a rusting bridge cable to take in the grandeur of the city.

The streets wound switchback paths up the cliffs, and steep stairs cut nearly vertical ascents between buildings. Suspension bridges arced between earthmotes above and below. Titanic pillars of stone rose from the sea, and gleaming elemental spires hung with crystalline clarity throughout the middle air. But today, the normally sunbaked streets and bright cliffs were dim beneath a shroud of clouds. An approaching storm darkened the iron sky, threatening a downpour of torrential strength. Normally she hated the rain, the dark, the sun-concealing clouds.

But not today.

Today, Airspur smelled sweeter than it had in months. The piling thunderheads looked like fairy castles. She wanted to fly up to them and see who lived inside. She wanted to sing. Maybe do a little jig. The queen was going to write to Carmenere on Riltana's behalf! All Riltana had to do was help Demascus check out some moist piece of rock off the coast and see what kind of idiocy the miners had got up to. Easy. She imagined a gold-foil envelope, stamped with the queen's seal in red wax. The envelope would be delivered to Carmenere's rooms in faraway High Imaskar. She could see Carmenere breaking the seal, then reading her royal aunt's

message that pled for the estranged silverstar to make peace with Riltana …

She pumped her fist and grinned at a pigeon roosting on a nearby suspension line. If Arathane put in a word for her, the stubborn silverstar was bound to see reason! Carmenere would never have taken the diplomatic post so far from Akanûl if she and Riltana hadn’t quarreled. Probably …

The sooner she and Demascus accomplished Queen Arathane’s little job, the sooner the message would be dispatched. Riltana had volunteered to investigate the warehouse while Demascus chartered a ship in the dock district. Demascus had wanted them to stick together, but she’d insisted they split their efforts to save time. Patience wasn’t one of her strengths. Besides, she wanted to distract herself from thinking about the near disaster of last evening. I was so close! she thought. That damned painting was supposed to have been in the House Norjah gallery. Her black market inquiry, courtesy of Chant’s connections, had finally produced a lead. The odd woman who’d responded had seemed so legitimate, knowledgeable, and convincing. She’d known things only someone familiar with the painting of Queen Cyndra could’ve described. Why had a stranger pretended the missing painting was in that shadowy gallery?

Riltana frowned. Eventually she’d get that painting back, oh yes. And Hells help anyone who stood in her way. Or maybe not. Maybe it didn’t matter anymore. Having Carmenere’s queenly aunt on Riltana’s side was a surer road to reconciliation than anything Riltana could hope to accomplish on her own. Maybe she didn’t need the royal painting to impress Carmenere …

Frankly, given what’d gone down at Demascus’s apartment the previous evening, it was lucky things had turned out as well as they had. The goddess Tymora must be smiling down on Riltana. So why do I feel so guilty?

She knew why, of course. Because of her own damnable impulsiveness. She couldn’t help herself when certain situations reared their heads. Like finding herself alone with a surfeit of valuable and easily transportable goodies. Riltana smacked a fist into her palm. The pigeon on the suspension cable startled and winged off. She hadn’t been completely honest with Demascus. The Norjah vampires were right to call her a thief. When she’d slipped into their gallery and found no sign of the painting she’d sought, well, she helped herself to one hanging there instead. As compensation, of course; she’d paid a pretty sum to the woman who’d given her the tip. Riltana couldn’t be expected just to eat that coin, right? She’d only realized that she might be diving off a higher cliff than she’d reckoned when she lifted one of the paintings from its hook. The illustrated figure began whispering to her secrets of thievery and concealment—

Reflexively, in the moment of surprise, she transferred the framed canvas to the nonspace her gloves accessed. Then, while still wondering if she’d merely imagined a talking canvas, an alarm tripped. Probably an alarm wired into the hook on which the painting had rested. A horde of pig-straddling vampires roared into the gallery. She’d fled, and they gave chase. Even through the empty air! When Riltana realized she wasn’t going to lose them, she headed to Demascus’s home. The deva had helped her out of binds before, though never one so serious. She blinked. It was too late to change what’d happened. All she could do was deal with any consequences from House Norjah. Later. After she and Demascus handled the arambarium situation and Riltana received her reward from Queen Arathane. It might not even be too much to imagine that Carmenere could receive Arathane’s letter within just a couple of tendays!

She pitched forward off the cable and dove past an entire cliffside neighborhood in mere heartbeats, braking on wings of wind at the last instant. She came down like a honeybee

on a petal, her boot heels barely clicking the shingles of a warehouse roof.

The queen had identified this warehouse. Thanks to her dawdling on the bridge, Demascus was probably already down along the wharf talking to potential ship owners about a charter. She'd have to make up for lost time.

Riltana dropped from the rooftop into the middle of the busy street. A gaggle of dockworkers glanced at her. Most likely they saw just one more courier wearing Airstepper Guild robes on her way to deliver a package to a captain or merchant in the dock district. The robes perfectly concealed her newly enchanted leather armor. Pricy, but paid for with the reward she'd earned when helping the queen with the plague demon hiding beneath the Firestorm Cabal several months earlier. She sauntered through the open front door of the warehouse. Sweat-soaked workers were wrestling crates into compact rows that stretched back to the far wall and halfway to the ceiling.

A genasi with a quill and scroll noticed her. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah. I've got a message to deliver."

"I'm listening."

"It's a document. I'm supposed to deliver it directly to the owner of this place."

The genasi shrugged and pointed at a short flight of stairs leading up to a landing halfway up one interior wall. "Lord Pashra isn't here."

"Mind if I wait?"

"Fine. But stay out of the way." The genasi returned his attention to the workers.

Riltana sidled up to the foreman. He was totaling cargo manifests. Apparently this Lord Pashra did a mean business in turnips, potatoes, and onions. That explained the pungent odor. Nothing mineral related. Not that she had expected it to be so easy.

“Yes?” the genasi said, noticing her still standing next to him and ogling his tallies.

“You know what? The smell of all these onions is making me sick to my stomach. Mind if I go wait up by the office?”

The genasi waved a hand. “If that will get you out from under my feet.”

Riltana took the stairs. When she reached the landing at the top and peered back, neither the foreman nor the workers spared her so much as a glance. They were absorbed in their task of finding a more efficient packing configuration to make room for a “mess of beets” from Turmish. If they were acting unconcerned to throw off suspicion, they were doing a damn fine job … Too good. Riltana had the sinking feeling she was on the wrong track and wasting time. Well, she was here. She should at least take a quick look around to make certain.

She faded back from the railing until she was right next to the office door. She tried the handle. Locked. But not for long. Riltana pulled a thin wire and a couple of other oddments from the cuff of her robe. With her back to the door and her eyes on the warehouse floor, she tried to give the impression that moving crates was the most fascinating thing she’d ever seen. She inserted the pick into the lock by touch. It was an exploratory poke, to see how many pins she was dealing with … and whether or not Lord Pashra had fortified the lock with a trap. But the telltale tightness of a mechanical trigger connected to something nasty, or the faint tingle that usually warned her of a hex, was absent. All she needed for the simple mechanism was a tension wrench, a slight turn, a few taps with the wire used like a pick … and click.

She opened the door just enough to slip through, and entered. She didn’t quite shut it behind her; she wanted to hear if anyone came up the stairs—

A flicker of movement by her boots made her freeze. She let out her breath as she watched a spider scuttle away

across the scratched plank floor, probably terrified she would stomp it flat.

The space was too big to have originally been an office. Pashra must have converted an ancillary storage room. A ramshackle table squatted in the center of the chamber, surrounded by stools. Another table was shoved into the far corner, creating a makeshift desk. It was layered with a mess of open scrolls and parchment pages. A lantern bolted to the wall over the desk bathed the room in yellowish light. Shelves in one corner held a litter of colored stones, books, scroll cases, and what apparently was a collection of dining plates from all over Toril. Then Riltana caught sight of a map on the wall between the desk and shelves that showed both the continent of Faerûn and a land mass to the west labeled “Returned Abeir.” The word “Menzoberranzan” was written in red ink on the map some miles northeast of Waterdeep. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but Riltana couldn’t place it. Something to do with elves, maybe?

“Now,” she murmured, “If I were secretly funneling a super-rare elemental mineral out of Akanûl, where would I hide my secret ledger describing my treachery in exact detail?” She chuckled. Finding such a record wasn’t out of the question. Criminals had at least as much cause to keep track of their merchandise as did legitimate merchants. In her experience the difference between legal and illegal wares was mostly dependent on how richly bribed the public officials were.

She sorted through paperwork. Manifests, lists of ports, projected prices for various vegetables, notes of intent to buy or sell various amounts of said vegetables, and upkeep costs for boats and warehouses … didn’t this Pashra have some sort of filing system? The disarray was almost comical and definitely ordinary.

Something came into focus about a foot in front of her, its shadow large on the clutter of documents. She leaped back with a curse even as she saw it was another spider, this one

hanging on a slender web she'd missed in the lantern's dull light. She'd never been especially afraid of spiders. Until she'd seen the nightmare called Murmur feed several people to its pit of bugs. They'd been devoured alive, swarmed by hungry spiders and other insects … Her stomach felt funny. She swallowed, and focused on the tiny arachnid dangling in front of her. It's just a spider, she told herself. It can't hurt you. Unless it's poisonous.

Either way, it was an ugly bastard with a body nearly as thick as her thumb. She could even make out its little eyes, like tiny buttons, fixed on her.

"All right, blister, that's how you want to play it?" She grabbed a handful of papers and rolled them up. As if it guessed her intent, the spider sprinted down its web line and disappeared somewhere behind the desk. She leaned across the morass of papers and noticed a hollow she'd missed in the wall. As she peered inside, her eyes widened.

The hollow crawled with spiders. Too many to count, boiling over each other and across some kind of bulky object. A … person, wrapped in a shroud of lacy webbing. She could make out features frozen in a rictus of open-mouthed terror, beneath a suffocating white layer.

"Oh, shit!" Most of the spiders were coin size, but a few were larger than her palm. She eased back.

"Greetings," a voice said.

Riltana spun. A watersoul genasi stood just inside the door, now closed. Damn.

"Who're you?" she said. Something wasn't right about him. The sea-foam hue of his skin was unnatural, as if the watersoul suffered some kind of sickness or blight.

"I'm Pashra. The question is who're *you*?"

She swallowed, and forced herself not to glance back down into the hollow.

"I, uh, got a message to deliver. A document. For you, I guess, if you're the owner."

The genasi said, “That’s me. Can I ask why you’re going through my desk?”

She raised the incriminating papers she’d rolled into an impromptu spider-swatter. “What, these? I thought I saw a bug.”

The man uttered something that almost sounded like a curse, but not in any language she knew. “Put those down, give me whatever you’ve got, then get out.” The genasi smiled. He sure had a lot of teeth …

And what was with the way his shadow was so much larger than his frame? The jagged silhouette on the wall almost looked like it had horns …

“You’re no genasi,” she said.

The man sighed and glanced sidelong at something on the door frame; another spider. This one was big, too. It had a black abdomen and a white head.

As if addressing it, he said, “You see? She’s a spy. Now help me silence her—your wall-crawling pets are good for more than watching me, aren’t they?”

Piss on a shingle! You just had to tell him you pierced his disguise, she thought. Did it make you feel smart? ’Cause now …

Pashra sucked in breath so large his chest visibly expanded. Then his body followed suit. He ballooned outward and upward, growing larger and larger, until he was the size of an ogre. It was his true size, she guessed, though his skin color remained unchanged. Coarse black hair was tied in a braid down his back, horns protruded from his forehead, and his mouth was so filled with oversize teeth that it didn’t even properly close. Oh yeah, plus he’d somehow come into possession of a sword that could pass as an oversized meat cleaver.

“What *are* you?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.” She loosed the tie on her Airstepper robe. It fell, revealing her ebony armor and providing easy access

to her sword and daggers. She leaped. The air hurled her like a ballista spear across the chamber. If she could stun Pashra, knock him away from the door—

Pashra uttered a mystical word. Vapor swirled from the tip of his cleaver and caught Riltana before she was halfway across the wide office. Cold like the inside of an ice cave painted a frost glaze across her armor and skin.

She fell out of the air. When she hit the central table, two of its four legs buckled. She rolled behind it, putting its sloped face between her and Pashra. The leech-son could cast spells! Her teeth chattered as the shock of Pashra's magical chill slowly abated. It doesn't mean he won't bleed, she thought. Let's see how he likes daggers. Two small blades, one from each glove, appeared in her palms. All right —

A spider the size of Chant's pet cat dropped on her. She stabbed it through the abdomen before it could fasten its pincers. It tumbled away and twitched on the floor, legs curling up around the leaking wound. A glance back at the desk showed a swarm of the spider's siblings emerging from their hollow and scuttling toward her. Most weren't nearly as large as the one she'd just dispatched, but there were so many she could hear the patter of hundreds of tiny legs.

"Damn web-spitting offal eaters!" she cursed. She flicked the dagger away, replacing it with a mountaineer's spike from her gloves. Then she jumped straight up and punched the spike into the wooden ceiling and dangled from the attached carabiner. She hoped it would keep her out of reach of the spiders on the floor. At least until they figured out they could climb up the walls and across the ceiling.

And there towered Pashra, horns pointed at her like swords, much closer than before. When he saw her looking at him, he grinned and raised his weapon. What was he? An ogre, yes, but a smart one.

She hurled a dagger with her free hand. Its point plunged into Pashra's right eye. The creature howled, a terrifying

sound halfway between a wolf's night call and a hunting panther's roar. The sound rippled through the air, knocking Riltana from her handhold. It roiled the spider swarm and blew out the tiny office window. Rain from the storm outside blew in.

The windsoul managed a half-graceful landing, despite a trickle of blood from her left ear. A residual ring hung in the air—or maybe that was in her head. She worked her jaw and blinked, trying desperately to gain her bearings. There was two of everything …

Where was Pashra? She squeezed her eyes shut then opened them. Her double vision merged back to normal, thank Tymora. She fixed her gaze back on Pashra. He hadn't advanced, but neither was he down. Instead, the blue-green hulk was carefully working the dagger out of his eye. Red fluid oozed from the socket, but when the blade came free, Riltana watched with horrified amazement as the punctured eye gradually re-inflated, until it was completely whole once more. Pashra swung his rejuvenated gaze on her and said, "I'm an oni mage. And you're overmatched, little spy."

Yells of concern filtered through the closed office door. By the sound of it, the workers wondered if Pashra was all right. Apparently they didn't know his secret identity as a monster. She needed to distract him. So Riltana fished.

"What's your connection to the arambarium mine?"

The oni's overlarge features stretched into an expression of surprise. "You know we're after the arambarium?"

She grinned. "We do *now*, chump. Thanks for confirming."

Pashra scowled, then said, "Who exactly is 'we?' "

Riltana carefully straightened. She'd managed to gain a little time with her spontaneous falsehood. Maybe she should try to extract a little more information before she fled. "Let's just say," she said, "we've had our eyes on you for quite a while now. Your efforts to panic Akanûl into a premature strike aren't going to work. We know you're trying

to stampede the Crown of Majesty into some kind of overt action against Tymanther.”

“Ah. You think that’s what I’m doing?”

“It’s obvious.”

The oni shrugged with lazy insolence and said, “You’ve figured me out. Oh, no.” The last dripped with so much sarcasm that Riltana knew she had missed something.

“I mean,” she said, “it’s obvious that’s your *cover* story.”

Pashra laughed, and it wasn’t a mirthful, happy sound. He glanced back at the lone spider nearest him and said, “She knows nothing, Chenraya.”

A voice—female, disdainful, and cold—seemed to issue from the tiny arachnid on the door frame. “Take her alive. She obviously knows *something* or she wouldn’t be here. Then bring her to me in person—this homunculus body is good for scrying and communication, but little else. We’ll drain her mind as easily as pouring out a cup. Then we’ll know.”

Shit! I might be out of my depth, Riltana thought. Despite the oni’s spell and obvious size advantage, she figured she was fairly evenly matched with the thing, assuming she could stay clear of the spiders. But the presence of a talking arachnid, or someone who was apparently using the arachnid to talk remotely, suggested Riltana didn’t really know the score.

Time to get gone. She glanced at the broken window—

And saw a spider the size of a street vendor’s cart bearing down on her.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL
17 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

RAIN STUNG THE WATER IN THE BAY OF AIRSPUR. SHIPS huddled close to their moorings, gray silhouettes half-visible through the downpour. Demascus strode the boardwalk, collar up and hands jammed in his jacket pockets. He was tired of being soaked to the skin. Unfortunately, winter along the coast of the Sea of Fallen Stars meant regular deluges.

He was looking for a ship to charter. But he'd paced up and down the docks a few times already like a sleepwalker, not really seeing anything as the cold seeped into his bones. Instead, the scene where a former version of him killed a woman named Madri kept cycling past his mind's eye. Another circumstance created by *another* him that was now being visited on Demascus. How fair was that?

Madri had been a beauty, no denying it. So like Queen Arathane in height and posture … He shook his head. He couldn't afford to notice similarities. Madri is your past, he thought. No. Not even *your* past. She's got nothing to do with Arathane, for shadow's sake! For that matter, the queen, while uncommonly approachable in his experience with royalty, had done nothing more than smile and chat with him. She was a monarch! Nothing more. Even if she *were* interested—

A boom of thunder brought him back to the moment. He looked around and realized he'd started on his fifth trip through the dock ward.

How much time had he wasted? Enough. Just pick a boat, already.

Demascus stopped walking and reviewed what he'd seen. Most of the ships had been too small or too large and work-a-day for his needs. Only a few seemed somewhat promising …

There! A caravel, triple-masted, with two square sails and one triangular. An elaborate figurehead hung at the ship's stem—a half-painted, half-sculpted woman with shimmering green scales in place of clothing. She glared into the rain, her eyes unnaturally brilliant. And she apparently gave the ship her name: *Green Siren II*. Now why did that seem familiar?

Dodging some hurrying dockworkers who were shepherding a cart overloaded with sodden grain sacks, he boarded the ship. He asked the first person he saw, a woman wearing a red scarf over her hair, to fetch the captain.

"Why should I?" she said.

"Because I'm looking to charter this ship, and I've got coin burning a hole in my purse," Demascus said. Then he ducked under the forecastle awning to get out of the rain. The crew person gave him the once-over, and left. In search of the captain, he hoped.

Less than a song later, a man clambered up from the hold. Demascus guessed he was the ship's owner because of his ridiculously prodigious hat and his confident swagger as he approached. A gold-trimmed coat that swept the ship's deck and a slender sword in a silver sheath completed the picture of a man unafraid of flamboyancy. Or at least someone who didn't mind cutting a figure reminiscent of the pirates that once hunted the waters north of Akanûl nearly a century earlier.

"My crew tells me you're looking to hire *Green Siren*?" The man produced a pipe and miniature coal urn from a pocket in his great coat. He set about lighting it with an ember pot.

"Depending on how well the captain can keep confidences, yes."

“They say Captain Thoster is a better secret-keeper than most. And Thoster, by the way, would be me.” The man held out a hand.

Demascus shook it. Thoster’s grip was cool, but strong.

“Demascus. I need a fast ship, and one that can defend itself if necessary.”

“Danger is just a reason to charge more coin. But seriously, you ain’t never heard of *Green Siren*? Fish piss, we once made the Sovereignty give up the Sea of Fallen Stars. ’Course we had a larger crew back then, and damn it if the city hasn’t come back … Still, this ship’s able enough. What’s the cargo?”

The scroll charm woven into Demascus’s hair, a token paid to his last incarnation by an avatar of the god Oghma, didn’t so much as twitch in response to the captain’s boast regarding the aboleth city. The man was telling something close to the truth, so he was more capable than he appeared. *Green Siren* might well be the ship.

“The cargo is me and a few associates. We’re headed for an island just off the coast, one not marked on any charts. And if I hire your craft, you’ll have to forget about it afterward. ”

“Ho, a place not on the charts? I like the sound of that. And to answer your question, lad, I can forget nearly anything, if coin is plentiful enough.” Thoster blew out a puff of smoke.

“My patron’s pockets are deep,” Demascus said. Arathane had told him to charter a ship, after all. It wasn’t like he had the coin to pull that off on his own.

“And as it turns out, I’ve got time on my hands,” said Thoster. “I’m waiting on a cargo of Chondalwood green-spice before I can ship back across the sea. So if we can do it in the next few days, *Green Siren*’s your ship.”

“How about later today?” said Demascus.

“Today? Umberlee’s creaking knees! Can’t you see what’s blowing in? This storm ain’t fit for any ship to sail in, not

even mine. No one's putting out for at least a day or two, until this blows over."

Demascus peered up at the flashing clouds smothering Airspur like a damp blanket. The frothing waves rolling into the bay *were* alarming. If anything, the captain was underestimating the fury of the storm. Burning dominions, he thought. Arathane's not going to be happy about a delay.

"When's the soonest we can put out?"

Thoster squinted into the storm, sucked contemplatively on his pipe, then said, "You never can tell with the sea. 'Course, I'm a better judge than most. Tell you what, Demascus. Show up here in two days, and if this ain't blown over, I'll buy you an ale. What'd'ya say?"

Demascus nodded. "It'll have to do. Assuming we can negotiate a price my patron is comfortable with."

"Of course. But if this mysterious patron of yours has coin to burn, as you—"

The captain broke off and cocked his head, listening.

"What—" began Demascus, then he heard it, too. A thin cry echoing down the street from the edge of the warehouse district, where it abutted the wharf. It was like a wolf's howl, but somehow more raw and threatening.

"Never heard anything like *that* before," said Thoster.

"Sounded like something chasing down prey," Demascus replied.

"Well, nothing to do with us, I expect," said Thoster.

"Maybe not. But then again, someone needs help."

Thoster raised his eyebrows as if the idea was wholly novel to him.

"I'll see you in two days," said Demascus. He flung himself down the rain-slick gangplank and onto the pier. The captain was probably right. The disturbing howl had nothing to do with him. But if some kind of creature was loose in the city, then it needed to be dealt with in case it took a while for peacemakers to arrive on the scene. And if nothing else, Demascus was good at "dealing" with things.

Besides, Arathane had identified a warehouse as a location of interest related to the sudden silence at the arambarium mine. Which Riltana had gone to investigate. Odds were miniscule the noise and Riltana were connected, but … Demascus increased his pace. The gray pall allowed him no easy shortcuts through shadow. And the bulk of his too-large sword, which he'd strapped onto his back and then forgotten about, was a hindrance as he ran. The scabbard rapped the backs of his calves every few steps, as if trying to trip him. Demascus slowed. Probably smart, anyway, given how slippery the street was with rainwater and runoff. Luckily he didn't have far to go.

A scattered crowd of bemused warehouse workers were pointing at one building. He dashed over, taking a few more scabbard slaps for his trouble. A broken window gaped high in the exterior wall, and shattered panes glinted on the street. Muffled bangs and cries issued from inside the gray and brown structure. The warehouse address and the place Riltana had made for earlier in the day were one and the same. Of course.

Demascus pulled the sheath off his back and drew the blade. The sword snuggled into his grip as if it'd missed him. He dropped the scabbard and ran inside.

Genasi workers fought a pitched battle against a horde of spiders. Spiders?

Lords of light, he thought, was the swarm demon they'd burned in the pit below the motherhouse still alive? How could it be? We roasted everything in that damnable hole. Although … he'd seen a few smoke-scorched moths escape, but they'd certainly expired. Right? Regardless, he'd been certain the spiders, roaches, and other crawlers had all been destroyed.

A woman's voice screamed something unintelligible. It issued from behind the door at the top of a short flight of stairs.

The deva swept his blade through a fat brown spider that was menacing a fallen earthsoul. Then he charged up the stairs. Something growled and moved behind the door, throwing a finger of darkness under the frame that brushed his boot. Just like that, he was through.

Demascus found himself in the shadow of a hulking humanoid with tangled black hair, horns, and a sword easily as long as Demascus's own. A name swam up from the blackness of some previous life … Oni. The thing was an oni mage, wielding a weapon ideal for its size and strength. A fearsome opponent. Great.

Just beyond the oni flitted Riltana. She parried and ducked the creature's frighteningly skillful sword strokes even as she stomped on and danced around another damnable swarm of spiders! A few were larger than any spider had a right to be. One especially bloated creature lay on its back, its hairy legs yet convulsing as ichor leaked from a dagger-shaped hole in its abdomen.

Demascus raised Exorcessum, intent on decapitating the oni with one perfect stroke—

"Pashra, behind you!" came a woman's voice. Demascus flinched, because the voice came from just above and behind him.

The oni ducked beneath the deva's swing and shuffled a quarter turn out from its original position. Instead of standing directly between Demascus and Riltana, the oni now formed one point of a triangle made up of Demascus, Riltana, and an oni apparently named Pashra. The oni was going to be trouble. Not to mention all the spiders trying to swarm over the windsoul. As well as whoever had warned the oni, someone he'd failed to—

He slapped at a burning sting on his neck. A spider fell away. No, not a spider; its tiny head wasn't arachnid. It was a woman's head with white hair!

"Gods!" Disgust pulled his face into a grimace.

Pashra laughed. The spider scuttled, but Demascus stomped on the tiny hybrid abomination. It popped under his boot like a rotten egg and squirted a messy green fluid everywhere. The tiny head spoke once more in a dying wheeze, “You’ve earned the enmity of the Queen of the Demonweb Pits, subcreature …”

That’s probably not good, Demascus thought.

“Chenraya!” the oni exclaimed, his delight transmuted to consternation.

Demascus took the opportunity to draw a deep line of blood down the creature’s right arm with Exorcessum’s rune-carved edge.

The oni howled and retreated a halfstep, parrying Demascus’s follow-up swing with a clang of iron.

“What’s a Demonweb queen?” asked Riltana, who’d taken advantage of Demascus’s attack to slip up close to the oni. She planted a dagger into Pashra’s left kidney.

The oni howled.

A familiar joy infused the deva, as the rhythm of conflict beat in his blood.

Demascus closed with the oni … then stumbled. Uh oh. He couldn’t feel his feet. And his fingers were going numb. And why was everything suddenly all misty? He realized the Hells-spawned spider had poisoned him!

He dropped to his knees. Exorcessum was nearly jarred from his grip. Nausea wrenched his stomach with a gruesome green claw and pulled. His battle élan slipped away. It couldn’t compete with the urge to sickup all over the floor.

“Demascus!” yelled Riltana. The oni turned its back on the deva and tried to divide the windsoul in two with a swift downward stroke. She deflected the blade with her short sword. The stroke’s force sent her staggering back into the throng of spiders.

Merciful lords, he thought, give me the strength to ignore his insult. He gagged, and drooled a line of spittle. Breakfast

was about to make an encore appearance—

A white rune on Exorcessum flared. When it washed across him his nausea vanished. Feeling returned to his hands and feet, and a little strength. The rune dimmed, becoming more a scar than a design. Still on his knees, he drew a gaping wound diagonally up the oni's back with Exorcessum's tip. Blood poured from the wound. It was the oni's turn to collapse.

"Demascus!" yelled Riltana. "Get these things off me!" Spiders mobbed her entire lower body. The windsoul's eyes were wide with terror as she swatted and rolled, but the insects continued to pile on.

He came to his feet and stepped around the motionless and bleeding oni. Riltana was hyperventilating. How was he going to extract her before they chewed her to the bone or poisoned her to death? Heartbeats counted!

He let Exorcessum clatter to the floor. He ripped the Veil from his neck and whipped the end so that it swirled around Riltana, spiders and all, wrapping them in an embrace of the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge.

The oni's shadow beneath the door had given him entry into the office, a shadow forged by the wavering office lantern. That same light, and the shadow of a dead spider the size of a wheelbarrow, would provide his next stepping-stone. The question was, could he bring Riltana along but not the spiders?

He stepped, willing his friend to accompany him across the gap of nothingness that lay beneath the world's facade and to leave mandibles and web-shrouds behind. He flashed into a fell echo of the room, where surfaces were uncertain and shadows writhed like centipedes up the walls.

A weight like a thousand-pound anchor yanked him up short. It tried to drag him down into the darkness from which there was no escape. Soul-draining cold sucked at his determination to retain his grip. His mind and body ached to let go of the weight and escape. But he didn't let go,

because the burden was Riltana, and to abandon her here would be the death of her. Or worse.

He screamed into the void of gloom, straining his entire spirit. He shuffled, bent-backed and head down, pulling on the stretching fabric of his scarf …

And stepped back into the warehouse office, only three paces from his origin, with Riltana in tow. Sans spiders. They'd made half the trip, though, but he'd shed them in the Shadowfell, where he'd nearly lost the windsoul, too.

"Shank me with a dull spoon," she murmured. "Don't *ever* do that again." She sat down hard.

Demascus tugged the Veil from Riltana as he wheeled to face the wounded oni.

Pashra was gone. He'd left behind only a slick of spilled blood.

"The bastard got out while the getting was good," muttered Riltana.

"What happened?" he asked. "Even for someone with your talent for angering the natives, I'd expect you would have thought better of mouthing off to an oni." He helped Riltana to her feet.

The windsoul shook her head. "As if I know what the Hells an oni is. When Pashra caught me going through his desk, he looked like a watersoul. Then when I saw his shadow didn't match his guise, I called him on it."

"So he had no choice but to attack you?"

"Um … yeah. I know, I know. Sometimes I can be a little too, um … impulsive." She rubbed at her eyes.

"That, or maybe you just have special needs. You know, like some nobles' children?"

"Which nobles' children?"

"The inbred ones they ship off to those special manors in the country …" He took a step back so when Riltana tried to swat him he was out of range. Or he tried to; he actually caught his foot on a dead spider and only just managed not to fall on his face.

It was Riltana's turn to steady him. "You all right?"

"A spider bit me. One with a … a woman's head."

"Yeah, I saw that one. Pashra was talking to it earlier. It said something about, um, demonwebs? You know about those, too?"

"Demonwebs …" The phrase was familiar, but its meaning danced just out of reach. He shook his head and continued, "The spider's bite was poison. I neutralized it, but a little venom is still in my blood. I probably wouldn't have noticed, except that dragging you clear of those spiders really taxed me. I'm not sure I could do it again."

Riltana said, her tone suddenly serious, "Thank you for that. I nearly lost my head when those things started crawling on me. If you hadn't … anyhow, thanks."

He nodded. "Happy to help. Let's see what kinds of secrets Pashra and his little woman-headed spider were so desperate to keep." Demascus retrieved his sword, then remembered he'd dropped Exorcessum's scabbard just outside in the rain. He sighed, and leaned the blade against the desk.

"I was trying to be circumspect last time," the windsoul said. "Trying to make it look like no one had been here. I guess we don't have to worry about that anymore." She opened a drawer and pulled out sheafs of parchment. She scanned each one, then tossed them, one at a time, over her shoulder.

He joined her. Each parchment, tracking grain density, pay, and the fluctuating rates of exchange rates in Cormyr versus Impiltur, and so on, went fluttering behind him to land in a growing drift. Lone spiders occasionally crawled aimlessly across the desk, but they were squashed nicely with a swat. He'd developed a real hatred of crawling, many-legged things during his time in Akanûl.

"Look," Riltana said. She pointed down into an open drawer.

"What?" He leaned over.

“False bottom.”

Then he saw it—faint seams outlined the shape of a rectangle.

The windsoul reached into the cavity and pressed along one side. The panel popped out. Inside the narrow space rested a thin leather ledger and a tiny chest.

“Pashra, Pashra, Pashra,” said the windsoul as she retrieved the curio chest. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to hide your valuables in false-bottom drawers? It’s the first place any good thief looks!”

Demascus grabbed the ledger. It was a record of cargo originating from an island just off the coast referred to as “the burial site.” He was disappointed to find no mention of the name of the ship responsible for providing transport. Odd. He doubted the cargo was just floating down from the sky into the warehouse. He paged forward. The cargo started appearing only a tenday ago. Which was about how long ago communication with the mine had ceased. According to the ledger, the cargo had been routed through this warehouse, a stopover on its way to “the new nexus.” No address for the nexus, either. But it was someplace in Akanûl, if not Airspur itself.

“I bet this is the real deal,” Riltana said, interrupting his perusal. She held the palm-sized chest in her hand, and the lid gaped open. It was mostly empty, except for a sprinkle of iron-hued grains.

“Arambarium?” he said.

“Gotta be.” She removed a glove, wet a finger, and carefully pressed down on a grain.

“Careful,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah.” She retracted her hand and held out her finger so they could both inspect the silvery grain adhered there.

“Doesn’t look particularly special,” he said.

“It … I can’t tell what temperature it is. One moment it’s warm, the next it’s cool as ice.” Her eyes were wide as she

stared with rapt attention at the arambarium chip.

“Maybe you should research the effects of raw arambarium contamination before you hold that too much longer.”

She said, “This *is* research, Demascus. Why don’t you get back to the ledger?”

He snorted, but did as she suggested.

Paging forward, he discovered that the arambarium routing through the warehouse had stopped the day before. Apparently, new arrangements were going to be made for “the final excavation.” No clues were forthcoming on what that might mean. The document disgorged two final pieces of information. A name, penned into the margin of the first page, read “Master Raneger.” With the name was the note, “May prove amenable.” Another note, written in a different hand, said, “The Gatekeeper has been enticed to guard the new nexus.”

He didn’t know who the Gatekeeper was. But Raneger … he was the criminal who Chant had once described as the most successful malefactor in all of Airspur and owner of the infamous Den of Games. His power lay in the fact that the peacemakers had never traced anything back to him. And perhaps he’d made an ally of one of the Stewards, though which one was debatable. Chant once owed a debt to Raneger so steep that the pawnbroker’s life had been forfeit. But that was water under the bridge. Despite at least one serious attempt on his life by Raneger, Chant had paid off his debt. Then, in what seemed like a feat of idiocy, Chant had taken a position with his former enemy at the Den of Games. Working for Raneger. Demascus still couldn’t figure out how that had come about. Chant’s shop was only open now by special appointment, which was why Fable, the finicky cat, was Demascus’s house guest.

The deva snapped the ledger shut. Riltana flicked the arambarium grain from her finger into the chest, closed it, and replaced her glove. She closed her hand over the chest,

and it vanished from her palm. “A down payment for services rendered,” she decreed.

Demascus doubted there was anything the woman wouldn’t steal. Part of her appeal, he supposed, was that brashness. Besides, it might be handy to have some arambarium of their own. He’d ask her not to dispose of the material in the chest to the highest bidder—maybe they could find a use for it. A discussion for later, though.

“Let’s get out here,” he said. “We’ve got an appointment.”

“Did you charter a ship?”

“Yeah. But the storm’s got them all stuck in the harbor. But that doesn’t mean we’ve got nothing to do.”

“What?”

He pointed to the ledger that contained Raneger’s name. “What say we pay a little visit to the Den of Games?”

CHAPTER SIX

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

17 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

It amazed her every time. And terrified her, because of what her new ability probably meant. Nothing natural could do what she could. Simply … *appearing* where she wanted to go. Or else, almost as often, in some random market or water pipe lounge around Airspur. Sometimes, she'd find herself standing on an earthmote high over Akanûl or on the lip of the North Wall gazing into the wasteland of Halruaa.

Halruaa had once been a vibrant land of high magic. Back when …

Back when I was still alive, she thought. Admit it, Madri. You're a gods-abandoned ghost. Stop lying to yourself. You're nothing more than a haunt with delusions of carrying on.

She shook her head. The rain made her hair a sodden tangle that wrapped her neck like seaweed. She shivered. A dead person couldn't feel cold, could she? A dead person couldn't *feel* at all!

When Madri had watched Demascus board the ship, the familiar rage shook her, but with it came a nugget of hope. No shell of life could feel such a pure rage, surely! Please, Kelemvor, Lord of the Dead, grant that I'm not a wraith just going through the motions, looking for peace denied me by an untimely death. Unfortunately, other clues also suggested she'd left the realm of the living. Usually she didn't dwell on them. But with Demascus now out of sight in the shadow of the ship's forecastle, and the relentless rain coming down like a shroud, her mind wandered.

The signs perched on her shoulders like crows. She never seemed hungry. Or thirsty. Gone were the headaches that

once assailed her if she didn’t indulge with a bowl of exotically blended tabac each day, even though she hadn’t smoked in months. But the most damning evidence of all was that sometimes hours or even days would pass in a dark dream of nothingness, as if she was simply *gone* from the world, without form, or substance, or mind. If that wasn’t the affliction suffered by a disembodied spirit—and she was going to hold fiercely to the opposite of that proposition—then what was she, exactly?

A different answer had occurred to Madri a few days ago, when she’d lured Demascus’s windsoul friend to the Norjah manor. The items of power in the vampires’ secret gallery were exceptionally potent examples of divine craftsmanship, and she needed one. As she’d waited for the windsoul to create the distraction Madri counted on, her mind flashed to an image of *Exorcessum*. The sword possessed as much divine power as any one of the paintings, though that strength slumbered. Was it possible that damned assassin’s tool had … What? Plucked a guilty image from the memory scraps still blowing through Demascus’s mind of Madri and … breathed life into it? Well, pseudo-life, anyway.

Exorcessum was the very first thing she could recall after her death. He’d just found the sword, after misplacing it in some mausoleum called Khalusk. Her first recent memory was of standing there, glaring at Demascus, who’d stared dumbly back as if he’d never seen her before.

She radiated anger. Her wet hair steamed with the heat of it. Which was more infuriating? she wondered. To meditate on the treacherous lunatic who’d snapped your neck while you were gazing at him like a love-struck idiot? Or to wonder if your entire current existence was nothing more than a part of someone’s fragmented memory? Am I a recollection given a sham existence by an errant pulse of divine energy from a mishandled magical artifact?

It was her new fear. When she wasn’t nervous that she might be an unquiet spirit, she worried she was something

even less real. At least if she was a ghost, she possessed a splinter of her former life. But if she was only a memory inflated like a festival balloon and let go over the city, then she couldn't trust anything in her own head. It was all just borrowed; it was all just her as *he* had thought of her.

Madness lay down that path. She knew it. If she continued on, trying to learn her exact status, she would probably be sorry. Just drop it, Madri!

Unfortunately, it wasn't in her nature to let questions remain unanswered. As a plenipotentiary of Halruaa, the hand-selected emissary—and spy—of Zalathorm himself, the eldest of the Council of Elders who ruled Halruaa, it had been her job to find information … And she'd been shattered to discover Halruaa had dissolved in the Spellplague, not long after her own death. Decades upon decades earlier. She'd been gone from the world for close to a hundred years …

Madri gritted her teeth. She couldn't let herself get distracted by the minutia of the past. She tried to focus on any interesting activity aboard the ship with the siren-decorated prow. Keeping an eye on Demascus was the most important thing now. She had to wait for her chance to collect the last ingredient for the ritual. The ritual that would ensure her revenge, and more.

An accomplished eavesdropper, Madri was fully cognizant of Demascus's commission from the queen of Akanûl. She'd seen the whole meeting that morning in the deva's home. Demascus would likely find himself in a dangerous spot if the queen's story about losing contact with her secret mine was accurate. And it would give Madri an opportunity to grab what she needed much sooner than she'd expected.

The weather, however, had other plans. Demascus wouldn't be going to sea today, she judged. The storm was too fierce. No ship captain would risk a vessel in such waters. So why keep watching? Foolish to remain out in the

worsening downpour like a jilted stalker. After all, she could be—

Flicker.

She was standing in a shadowed corner of the Copperhead, an Airspur water pipe lounge she'd appeared in several times this month. As usual, when she made such transitions, no one noticed. The patrons continued to lounge about the comfortable chamber, drawing in water-cooled smoke and releasing it with the grandeur of exhaling dragons. The Copperhead reminded her of a place she'd frequented in her old life. The odor of a dozen special blends of tabac, the sound of bubbling smoke through water, and the relaxed demeanor of the customers were so familiar. If she closed her eyes, she might well be in that other place and time. Closing her eyes also helped because, in Halruaa, there'd been no genasi.

She'd become used to the elemental people of Akanûl the last few months. All except for that queen who'd given Demascus his commission. Arathane. Her mouth tightened. Even though the woman had probably handed Madri the opportunity she required to advance her own plan, she'd taken an instant dislike to the monarch. The genasi was too familiar with Demascus.

What, are you jealous? Of someone competing for the affections of your killer? She smirked at her own foolishness. The mind is a tangled thing. Did the queen truly have an interest in Demascus? It was improbable, though not impossible. Madri recalled how she herself had been intrigued by him, despite her lofty responsibilities. Queen Arathane, regardless of her station, might be similarly impressed with the deva, even though he seemed only an echo of what he'd been.

She didn't like to consider it. She should return to the crypt and see if any new instructions were forthcoming from the single entity that knew she walked in the world. Instead,

she lingered in her corner, watching patrons drift in and out of the rain.



Madri and Demascus had met in a water pipe lounge. Zalathorm had arranged for her to meet the visiting “champion” of epic repute, the mysterious deva who’d rid Halruaa of a secret menace, to see what she might learn. No one knew the details, not even Zalathorm. It had been enough that Mystra, the patron goddess of Halruaa, had let it be known through her servitors that Demascus had done Zalathorm a great service. Madri’s job was to learn more in the guise of genteel companionship.

Madri viewed her meeting with Demascus as one more state function. Certainly the stakes were potentially high, but she was used to that. Zalathorm worried that Damascus might turn out to be a secret agent for Estagund, who’d somehow fooled even divine beings. It had happened before.

They’d met under an umbrella, one midday. Demascus, who she’d thought of then as a pale-skinned human, acted like he’d rather be anywhere else. He refused to so much as look at her, talking only of politics, of temples and gods and their clergy, and other meaningless jabber. He wouldn’t speak about Mystra, the “great favor” he’d supposedly done the people of Halruaa, or anything of real substance. He disdained even trying a single draw on the water pipe. And he’d caught her glance only once—she saw that his eyes were the color of ancient glaciers—then he quickly looked away.

If it hadn’t been for that one passing glance, Madri would have thought him one of the biggest bores she’d ever had the misfortune to meet. And that would have been that.

Zalathorm was disappointed with her report, but sometimes even someone with her skills in finding out the obscure and hidden comes up dry. She’d done background on Demascus, using a mix of her mundane and arcane

resources, and found so little that she'd become sure that, at the very least, he was an expert in obscuring his past. Hells, he could even throw *her* off the trail. It made her curious, but she had other issues to fill her mind.

A letter came for her two months later from Demascus, asking that they meet again at the same place. She penned a reply and gave it to the messenger. And instantly regretted it. She wasn't looking for another opportunity to learn what Zalathorm wanted; she wanted to see the stranger's startling eyes again. What a fool you are, Madri! This is no assignment. Remember what an ass he was?

In his message Demascus had said, "I hope you'll accept my apology for acting the hound. I wasn't ready for a social engagement. Sorry I subjected you to my worst self, still tired from my previous task. But if you're available, I'd like to see you again and apologize in person. You're one of the few people I know in the city."

When she met him the second time, it was a cool evening. They sat at the same table as before, this time with candles flickering between them. The smells of smoke, body heat over crushed roses, and violets mingled in the air. He looked right at her. His eyes were wells, leading down to depths of experience she could hardly imagine. They talked for hours.

Later, when the evening had drawn to a close, they kissed goodnight. Her chest, the hollows behind her knees, every part of her body seemed to fill with light. Her hands clutched briefly across the small of his back, pulling him into an embrace. What was she doing?

She'd been struck insane, obviously.

When they drew apart, she suggested they meet for a third time. And so their romance began.



A glum-looking watersoul banged into the Copperhead, and Madri's reminisces went up with the smoke of a dozen exhalations.

Damn me, what's past is past, she thought. I've got to focus on the present. Halruaa is gone, and I'm in Akanûl. Thanks to … Demascus himself, perhaps.

She remembered when he'd last gazed at her in Halruaa, with sorrow scribing his face like talons. As if he was sorry for what he was doing, even as his hands tightened on her head, for the final sharp twist …

Darkness seemed to stretch forever.

Until she was somewhere else, a mausoleum. Demascus, the Sword of the Gods, was there, too. Except that he was clutching his blade like a child just out of weapons training. He gaped at her with wide, ice-blue eyes. If Madri hadn't immediately lapsed into another fit of timeless nonexistence, she would have gone for his throat.

"Madam, I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," a voice said. She shook her head, clearing the memory and returning to the moment. The proprietor of the Copperhead was wiping down a table, scant feet from her. He was hardly more than a kid, pierced with flashing jewelry, and staring with a question in his eyes. "Follow me. I'll set you up with a pipe."

"No, no, I'm fine," she replied. "I came in to get out of the rain."

"Ah. I suppose that's all right. If you change your mind, just head up to the counter there." The kid gave her a curious stare.

She sometimes forgot that, though she could appear and disappear without drawing attention to herself, as if people in the vicinity had just edited her into or out of their consciousness, it didn't mean she was invisible.

Time to leave. She concentrated, hoping that if she fixed carefully in her mind the image of where she wanted to go, she could avoid too many more random hops …

Flicker.

Earthmotes drifting through piles of lightning-lit clouds.

Flicker.

A cliff face on which the Sea of Fallen Stars lashed its rage.

Flicker.

A floating obelisk, cratered and crusted like a fossil dug from the living rock of Toril and set adrift in the sky. Tentacles hundreds of yards long slithered down its sides. What? Was she even in Akanûl any—

Flicker.

Darkness and the smell of loose earth. The odor, despite its sour tang, was a welcome one. She was back. Madri mumbled a charm. A light caught in the lantern mantle. The glow revealed a small side table and chair. A silvery mask, blank but for two shadowed eye openings, lay next to the lantern on the table.

She dropped into the chair. It was the one comfortable piece of furniture down here. She eyed the mask, wondering if it had a comment or instruction for her. When the mask remained quiescent, she turned to look at the stone wall opposite her. The surface possessed a couple of notable features—a narrow flight of stairs leading up to a secret door and a painting.

Red velvet draped the painting, hiding the visage scowling beneath it. The first time she'd locked eyes with the entity called the Necromancer, illustrated on the canvas, it had spoken words of horror to her. She'd fallen to the floor as her body spasmed out of control. Afterward she'd retched, but nothing came up. The image she'd seen, a face composed of broken pieces of reality, screaming in frozen unending agony at its splintered flesh and mind … Gods!

That event further sustained her hope that she wasn't a ghost. Ghosts didn't have fits, did they? Or try to puke up their guts?

After she'd collected herself, Madri had procured a drape for the painting. She had a feeling that, no matter her status, too much undirected exposure to the Necromancer could permanently damage her.

She glanced away. There were two more interesting features in the room. The first was a fissure across the floor

that dropped into darkness. She'd made no attempt to plumb it, other than throwing a single pebble into the cavity and failing to hear it strike bottom.

The second was a heaped pile of grave dirt. Madri pushed herself out of the chair and approached the black mound. Close up, the sour odor was mixed with the reek of a rotting carcass. Beneath the dirt lay the shell of Kalkan Swordbreaker. Kalkan who, one day soon—far sooner than Demascus could hope to be ready for—would be reborn. When this self-styled nemesis of the Sword of the Gods woke, he'd help Madri exact vengeance against Demascus. So the mask promised, at any rate.

Her nose wrinkled with the odor. But she patted the waist-high pile of soil like it was a pet. "You'd better actually be in there, Kalkan, slouching back to the world to live again. Because sometimes I worry I'm imagining all this as I spin in my own grave …"

"Kalkan is real enough," said the mask on the table.

She turned. "You're awake?"

"Evidently."

Madri hated the mask. It had found her flickering around Airspur, afraid and alone. It gave her purpose and promised revenge on the one who had killed her. But it also toyed with her, sometimes telling her minor falsehoods as if it enjoyed tripping her up. As if it couldn't help but weave falsehood with truth, despite her allegiance to it.

"Fossil," she said, for that's what she sometimes called the mask for lack of any better name, "is your master any nearer to waking on his own?"

"What makes you believe I serve Kalkan?" came the cold, androgynous voice.

Her lips thinned. "You told me Kalkan Swordbreaker was divinely appointed to keep Demascus in check—"

"Correct, lest he grow too powerful on Toril," the mask interrupted, only to fall silent again.

She waited for the mask to continue. Of course, it did not. It was just like Fossil to speak in riddles, when it wasn't making outright fabrications. So be it, she thought, I'm a champion riddle solver.

"You once described how Kalkan, like Demascus, was doomed to return to the world again and again."

The mask lifted off the table to hang in the air, facing her. She had piqued its interest. "You also referred to yourself as a reanimated angel remnant who once served a god of Toril who had been wronged by all others," she continued. "You made it sound like that was in the past, that the deity was dead or imprisoned … But now I think it's possible you still serve that one and not Kalkan at all. Which is it?"

The mask didn't speak for so long that she was readying herself to shout at the obstinate thing when it said, "It doesn't matter. What matters is that our purposes are aligned. You seek to punish Demascus. Kalkan is the vehicle by which that shall be accomplished. Be glad you've been brought into this at all, figment."

Figment? That was a new one. She stored that away for later reflection. "You still haven't described how it's going to work. Punishing the deva as he deserves will be tricky, since he's guaranteed to return from the dead."

"The Swordbreaker has pursued Demascus down through the centuries. He has a plan."

"Of course," Madri said. "In fact, I saw him again today. He seeks to charter a ship."

"As Kalkan predicted," the mask stated.

Everything she did was predicated on some sort of scheme devised by Kalkan. A scheme so tangled that it could've been drawn up only by someone with impossibly precise foreknowledge of the future. As a plenipotentiary, she had some experience with the divinatory school of magic. She'd always found divination imprecise at best, and useful for only a few hours of forward-gazing. Whatever magic Kalkan

possessed, it was something that defied all the theory and teaching she'd received in Halruaa.

Then again, Kalkan was a rakshasa, a creature with access to secrets few others knew. Upon its death, a rakshasa was guaranteed eventual reincarnation. When it did reappear, it retained all the memories and knowledge of each and every one of its former selves. A rakshasa had lifetimes to learn from its mistakes, and each rakshasa had the cumulative wisdom of a thousand lives, giving it firsthand knowledge of history and the experience from tens of thousands of schemes. During his existence, Kalkan had apparently gathered many powerful secrets.

The sooner she and Fossil could move forward with the ritual, the sooner Kalkan would return to the world and take up after the deva once more. She'd once asked why just she and Fossil couldn't go after Demascus themselves. The mask simply refused to answer. Which told her it was more concerned with Kalkan's return than her own vengeance. She was just another tool, one that would gain satisfaction when Kalkan's plan finally saw the deva to the end he deserved.

"Demascus can't go the island immediately," she said. "Not today, probably not for several days. A storm has all the ships held in port."

"A storm? I don't recall that being part of …" The mask trailed off.

"So, what other ingredients does the ritual require? I've gotten you the whispering painting, the one called the Necromancer. And you said the last ingredient could be gathered when Demascus visits this mysterious island. What must I do when that happens?" She waited for the thing to continue.

Silence.

She approached it and tapped a fingernail on its smooth face. "Anyone home?"

The mask settled back down next to the lamp. It'd lapsed back to sleep, or whatever it did when it wouldn't talk. If it was a spirit bound to an object, perhaps it ceased continuity for a while. Like when she experienced her own episodes of time loss—

She waved the thought away like an annoying gnat. Anyway, Fossil had called her "figment." Though it probably only did so to make her wonder—she'd made the mistake of mentioning her latest fear about her status to the mask.

Just to be sure, she tapped Fossil again. Nothing. She was tempted to pick it up and toss it down the chasm, just to see if anything would happen. No. She had a more pressing need to take care of while Fossil was "out."

She faced the draped picture. If Necromancer could provide instructions to Fossil on how to resurrect Kalkan early … it could damn well do something for her, too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

17 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Peanut shells covered the floor and crunched underfoot. The mouth-watering aroma of sizzling bacon filled the air. And a trio of musicians dressed in garish scarlet robes performed a raunchy melody to an audience that included a raft of empty tables, a slumped-over man in a green jacket, two squabbling women wearing too much makeup … and Chant Morven.

Chant had expected more people in Digger's Bar, since the private lounge was connected to the Den of Games. He'd been down here a few times when it was shoulder to shoulder.

He crunched toward the back of the lounge. People said if you drank down three full draws of Digger's Ale, you wouldn't ask for a fourth. Instead, your friends would be carrying you home. Better hope you have friends, or instead you'd wake to the tender mercies of a press gang assembling a crew for some distant harbor.

The rear of the lounge was one continuous bar. And there sat Jaul. Chant's son was leaning over the counter-top to whisper a confidence to Digger. Jaul shared none of his father's stoutness; the young man took after his mother that way. The trio of daggers Jaul was so proud of rode on the young man's belt in identical scarlet sheaths.

Digger was a black-bearded dwarf who smelled of hops and pork. He'd been Jaul's friend from the time the boy was eleven years old. Chant blamed Digger for introducing Jaul to the Den of Games and to Raneger. If not for Digger's

constant encouragement, Jaul wouldn't be taking coin from Raneger. It still rankled …

Chant sat down next his son. "I'll have what he's having," Chant said to Digger. "And some of that bacon."

The dwarf said, "Sure, sure." He gave a contemptuous sneer.

"Well?" said Chant, glancing at the tapped keg.

Digger chuckled and finally moved to fill a tankard.

Jaul studiously ignored his father. He rubbed at a tattoo visible on his left wrist. It was the tattoo Raneger had given him, a crystal dagger inside a crashing wave. Chant hated it. It was a sign of allegiance to the crime lord that many of Raneger's people displayed.

Chant forced a smile and said, "Jaul, glad you're here. How … How're you doing?"

"Fine," snapped Jaul. His eyes went to the playing cards scattered across the bar. He began to sort through them. Silence stretched.

Chant knew the young man resented him. He had for years. Growing up human in a city predominantly populated with genasi had been hard. Too many bullies, and later, too many scuffles where the onus was always on Jaul to show he, as the *human*, could fit in or prove himself. Then Jaul started hanging out with a dissolute rabble of nobles with nothing better to do than make pests of themselves. The peacemakers were fair enough, but they had no tolerance for pranks. Childish shenanigans could easily transform into something worse. And as the lone human among his new "friends," Jaul was always the one the peacemakers noticed.

After Chant's wife died, it would've been easy enough to leave Akanûl. And he probably should have. But his pawnshop business was just beginning to turn a profit, and his nascent network of secret gatherers was becoming something more than a mere idea. He'd had coin on his mind; it was how he'd coped with the disintegration of his marriage.

Jaul had fallen through the cracks. He'd paid too little mind to the boy. Digger had probably saved Jaul's life when he ran afoul of some toughs. According to the story Chant heard, Digger had charged into a melee that pitted Jaul against five others with nothing more than an improvised club. Since then, everything Digger said was law to Jaul. So when Digger told the young man there was a job for him at the Den of Games, nothing Chant could do or say made any difference. Well, he had made one difference—he'd managed to completely alienate his son and give Raneger the hook he required to make sure Chant wouldn't flee his debt.

"Why're you still here, anyway?" Jaul said suddenly.

"I'm waiting for my ale—"

"No, Pa, you know what I mean. Why're you still working at the Den? Digger says you paid your debt to the house. You can go back to your pawnshop anytime."

"Ah. Yeah, I've paid my debt. Raneger isn't sending goons after me anymore to threaten my life—"

"That never happened!" said Jaul.

"It did. Open your eyes."

Jaul looked disgusted. But he said, "All right, maybe. Probably just to scare you. But if Raneger sent you reminders, then I *really* don't understand why you've taken on here. You must hate it." Jaul gestured with his mug at the room. Ale sloshed over the rim.

Chant sighed. He knew Jaul was right. But he also knew his son drank too much for so early in the day. However, pointing that sort of thing out to his son was the best way to end a conversation. He decided to be honest.

"Couple reasons I'm here," Chant finally said. "First, it's the only way I can see you. You're still my blood, and I want to look out for you."

Jaul rolled his eyes. "Just like you used to?"

Sharkbite! Chant clamped down on the anger that was his automatic response. His son knew all the right triggers.

“Second … well, the job I took, the one that paid me so well I was able to pay off Raneger’s crazy claim, well, it was dangerous. I got on the wrong side of Chevesh. He’s a fire mage that—”

“The crazy wizard?” Jaul turned in his seat to face his father. His eyes had gone wide with interest. Jaul hadn’t looked at him like that in more than a year. Maybe several years.

“Yeah, he’s crazy all right,” said Chant, warming to the topic. “A human trying to graft himself with genasi firesoul heritage. But the only thing he’s managed to accomplish is to bake his own brain.”

“What’d you do? Why’s Chevesh after you?”

“I asked him if he was responsible for some bad stuff going down around the city a few months ago. Nightmares coming to life, demons appearing and killing people. We had to sneak into his tower—”

“Damn, Pa! You snuck into Chevesh’s? What’d you find?”

Chant took his beer from Digger. He sipped and then said, “Chevesh had nothing to do with the abyssal plague we were hunting down, turns out. But he was mighty put out when he found me and Demascus in his sanctum. We managed to get away with just a few burns. But he recognized me, and he swore vengeance.”

Jaul shook his head, but not in disgust or fear. In admiration!

Chant continued, “I’d hoped that since he was soft in the head, Chevesh would forget. But, oh, how wrong I was. He hired assassins.”

Jaul swallowed his beer wrong. When the coughing subsided, he said, “Mystra’s Corpse! And you fought them off?”

“No. I should say, he tried to hire assassins—he thought he had. Chevesh contracted with someone on Raneger’s payroll. Raneger, who’d just collected my debt, had his proxy pretend to accept. Then Raneger summoned me to the

Den and revealed the signed contract. Said that he'd be willing to permanently lose the thing if I'd put my secret-gathering network at his disposal for one year. That was six months ago."

"Wait, wait. Master Raneger did that for you? Because … because he wanted to use *your* network?"

"Close your mouth, son, you look soft in the head. Is it so unbelievable that your old man built something that Raneger might value?"

"I guess not." Jaul's mouth twitched; an incipient grin.

Score one for the old man, Chant thought. He sipped his beer, hiding his own smile. Then he frowned. Impressing his son by revealing how a master criminal was exploiting the pawnbroker's network wasn't exactly how he wanted to mend fences with Jaul. He wanted to pull him out of this situation, not make it seem like something reasonable. Chant suspected he was a terrible role model. It was no wonder his boy—

"Hey, Pa, I'm heading over to the Plaza of Dancing Dolphins tonight. They got good music there, a better grade than this rat piss." He waved at the musicians in the corner. "It might be all right, if you wanted to come?"

On the other hand, Chant thought, he couldn't argue with results. "Sure, I'd like that."

Digger came to check on Jaul. The dwarf frowned to see the pawnbroker still there. That's right, thought Chant, eyeing the greasy dwarf. Jaul and I are family, and I'm not letting you or this organization turn us against each other again.

A tug on Chant's sleeve turned out to be one of the musicians. "What?"

"Someone's looking for you." The musician pointed at a pale man with tattoos the color of ash.

"Waukeen's empty purse!" Chant said.

Jaul glanced at the stranger. "Who's that?"

“Demascus!” Chant called, and waved the deva over. Behind him came Riltana. The pawnbroker grinned. Both were dripping wet. The storm must still be howling outside. “A reunion,” he said. “Digger, ale for my friends.”

He opened his mouth to ask Riltana how Carmenere was, then closed it. Sometimes he could manage tact.

Jaul eyed the damp strangers.

“Jaul, meet Demascus and Riltana. And this is Jaul, the apple of my eye.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Demascus, and offered a hand. Jaul didn’t react for only a moment, just long enough to be rude, then shook.

Riltana nodded and said, “Hey kid, nice to meet you.”

“Chant,” said the deva, “It’s great to see you again. It’s been too long.”

The pawnbroker smiled. “Decide to try your hand at some games? I can steer you to a couple of tables that aren’t fixed. And how’s my cat?”

“No games today,” said Demascus. “And Fable is settled in well. A little too well. I think she believes *she’s* the master and I’m her servant.” Chant and Jaul both chuckled

“Actually, I have something I want to talk to you about,” Demascus said. “Fairly serious … is there anywhere we can talk?”

Riltana let her gaze rest on Jaul for a couple of heartbeats, just long enough to imply his son’s presence was an annoyance.

Jaul stiffened as he realized he’d suddenly become the odd man out. Sharkbite! Not when he’d just made so much headway!

Chant raised his hand and said, “Demascus, I have no secrets from my son. What’s on your mind?”

Demascus frowned. “Chant. This is sensitive material. I trust you and your son can keep it confidential?”

Chant glanced at Jaul, who licked his lips and nodded. Chant was already regretting his words. Of course the boy

couldn’t keep a secret. Why, just—

“Great.” Demascus leaned in, and Riltana followed his lead. “There’s been a mining disruption,” said the deva, “and the Throne of Majesty is concerned it’s actually a covert attack by a foreign power. Queen Arathane is desperate for some actual intelligence at the mine site before the Four Stewards force some sort of military action based on fear, not facts.”

“News to me,” said Chant. His mind automatically started a list of people who’d pay good coin to hear it … He pinched off that line of thought. Demascus was his friend, and this particular secret was not his to sell. Old habits were hard to break.

“What kind of mine?” said Jaul.

Demascus raised a finger to acknowledge the question, but continued on his original tack. “Here’s the thing. We found documents that suggest Raneger is somehow connected to the mining disruption. Know anything about it?”

Chant stroked his chin. Mining? “No. Master Raneger has his fingers in a lot that goes on in the city, legal and less so. But I don’t think he’s got the infrastructure to support that sort of operation.”

“A mining disruption—what’s that mean?”

Chant glanced at his son. The boy was persistent. “Jaul’s got a point. What’s this really about?”

“A mine operated by the Crown has gone silent. It’s a secret excavation, so I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of it. But Raneger may have.”

“What kind of mine?” said Chant.

Demascus leaned even closer and said, “Arambarium.”

Arambarium? Sounded like a mineral he should know about, but he was coming up blank.

But Jaul was nodding. “Master Raneger was talking to some people about arambarium a few tendays ago.”

Chant and Demascus speared Jaul with surprised looks.

“Who was Raneger talking to?” said Riltana.

“Not sure—I caught it in passing. But I remember they said ‘arambarium’ because it was a new one on me. It stuck with me.”

“Anything else?” said Demascus.

“Something about moving the goods through some warehouse. But our game was over, so I took off.”

Chant looked at his son, an odd feeling in his stomach. “You play games … with Raneger? In his receiving room?” The idea of Jaul having such a casual relationship with the low-down snake made his blood run cold.

Jaul shrugged. “He gets lots of visitors, some of them pretty odd. I’m usually the least impressive person in Raneger’s court. Except at cards.” He chuckled. “Raneger likes cards. And I’m pretty damn good, Pa.”

“Jaul,” said Demascus, “Can you get us a meeting with Raneger?”

“Probably.”

Chant opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. Then opened it again and said instead, “What if this arambarium is a secret we’d rather Raneger didn’t know that we knew? It could be dangerous to question him on the topic.”

Riltana slapped Chant’s shoulder, “Then I guess we better be ready to fight, huh?” She grinned.

Jaul clapped his hands and shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell Raneger you’re with me.”

Raneger’s dim receiving room was vast, supported by a double row of marble columns, with a pool recessed in the middle of the floor, giving the air a moist, dank quality. Sometimes the crime lord invited the keepers of fighting drakes and sword moths to provide bloody sport. Other times he hosted musicians, or elaborately costumed dancers, or even the occasional jester.

Chant particularly hated jesters. He was glad to see none were in attendance. However, the rest of Raneger's "court" was present as Chant and his friends were ushered in. Chant recognized several faces among the varied bunch of bootlickers, bounty hunters, and other scoundrels seeking the crime lord's favor. What kind of secret monger would he be if he didn't?

Ah, but who's this? A man stood before Raneger, tall and kingly. A gemstone was bound on his brow like a crown. But if he was slumming in Raneger's court, the man was probably a fell dignitary of a foreign power. The symbol of a dark skull on a gold disc on the man's belt cinched it—the fellow must be some kind of Zhentarim mercenary or captain.

"Until next time, Lord Numegista," Raneger said to the man. "I look forward to your next visit."

Chant's ears pricked. What an odd tone. Raneger actually sounded respectful!

The stranger swept out without so much as a glance in their direction. His green eyes were fixed on some internal question. When he had some time to spare, Chant decided he would put out feelers. It might be interesting to know who Numegista actually was. A Zhent able to command the deference of Akanûl's most accomplished crime lord was someone Chant should know, too …

Raneger motioned them forward. Jaul moved to the edge of pool—it seemed the crimelord never left his aquatic basin. Chant and the others followed, though not as close as his son.

"Jaul, you didn't mention we'd have guests," said Raneger. "I suppose you have a good reason to disturb my court?" The waters of Raneger's pool sloshed against the sides.

"Disturb? But I thought …" said Jaul, and swallowed. The young man mopped at his brow, surprise evident on his face.

"You thought what, whelp? That because I show you more favor than most, that you can abuse my trust and bring

beggars to my pool?”

Jaul opened and closed his mouth, apparently speechless.

Chant didn’t give a shark’s fin who Raneger was—no one could treat his son that way! He opened his mouth to tell Raneger to go drown himself or something even more irrevocable, but Demascus beat him to it, saying, “Master Raneger, I apologize for using Jaul’s good graces to burst in on your business; I assure you, he’s blameless. I have a question for you, and hope you’re willing to answer it.”

Not really what Chant had been about to say, but perhaps the diplomatic route was the better choice. He mollified himself by patting Jaul’s shoulder. Jaul shot him an angry look for his trouble. Oops.

Raneger shifted position, sending ripples up and down the pool. A wave broke over the side and a sheet of water slid across the tiles of the receiving chamber toward where most of the court stood in small groups.

Riltana looked horrified as liquid sloshed over her boots. She glanced longingly at the exit but held her ground.

Chant felt liquid seep into his own boots and soak his feet. Wonderful. But if he got out of this meeting with only wet socks as the worst consequence, he would count himself lucky.

“And who’re *you*?” Raneger jerked his immense bulk upright, sending an even larger wave cascading across the tile. His head was then fully visible—humanoid, but so bloated with fat one might easily mistake Raneger for some sort of grotesque creature.

“I thought he was a kind of high elf,” Riltana whispered in Chant’s ear.

“Most people do,” he whispered back.

Demascus stepped closer. “The name’s Demascus. Thanks for the audience. I appreciate that you’re a busy man, so I’ll be brief; I found a clue linking you to a fairly thorny situation.”

Raneger's *szuldar* blazed suddenly, producing chasing spirals of green light that barely outlined something horribly swollen and large beneath the pool's surface. Raneger might be a watersoul genasi, but only just. "Speak on, Demascus. But know this. As soon as you leave here, I'll discover everything there is to know about you. Who you know. Where you live. And what's important to you. So do not make me angry."

Demascus eyed the misshapen watersoul. His expression seemed to darken, as if he'd stepped back into a shadow. Uh, oh.

Chant cleared his throat, trying to catch the deva's attention. Now wasn't the time for Demascus to call his "other" out to play.

"I wish you luck in that, Raneger," said Demascus. "Because I've been trying to do exactly the same. Maybe you can tell me what's important to me, because I'd dearly like to find out."

Raneger narrowed his eyes, obviously not understanding.

"But if you're through with threats—what do you know about Akanûl's arambarium mine?"

Raneger's expression froze. "What authority do you have that makes you believe you won't suffer immediate retribution from me? Why should I not kill you, rather than answer?"

"Because I think you want to know what I know."

Chant sweated. What the Hells had Demascus led him and Jaul into?

Finally Raneger gave a tiny nod. When he spoke, his voice was as cold as ice. "Arambarium is a mineral. The Throne of Majesty has been secretly harvesting it from an island off the coast."

"And what about recent happenings?"

"You'll have to explain," said the watersoul.

"All contact with the mine is lost. All attempts to find out what's going on at the site have been stymied. And you've

been fingered as having something to do with it by a creature named Pashra."

A miniature tsunami surged over the pool's lip, but hung suspended rather than crashing across them.

"How interesting. And where is this Pashra now?"

Demascus spread his hands and shrugged. "I hoped you might know, actually."

Sharkbite, Demascus really *was* going to precipitate a fight! Chant sidled closer to Jaul. His son's mouth was open at the spectacle of someone standing up to the criminal lord.

"Let me guess. He double-crossed you, too? Cut you out of a deal just before payment was due? If I find Pashra, he and his friend will learn what it means to cross me." The frozen wave of water collapsed on itself, becoming a swirling fist of dark fluid.

Demascus spared the watery display a glance, then said, "What was your deal? And who is Pashra's friend?"

"Tell me what you know first." The liquid fist unclenched, lost cohesion, and showered down into the pool.

"I found a warehouse where Pashra was routing arambarium. I saw your name in the ledger after we chased Pashra away. Something about your being amenable to the deal. He was working with a woman, though I never saw her. Just heard her voice. And she seemed a fair spider tamer."

Raneger nodded. He rubbed his jaw as he considered the water-dappled dome overhead. Finally he said, "They came to me with a proposition. One was called Pashra, and the other was a woman named Chenraya. She hid under a hood. As if she could hide who she was from *me*. Chenraya, of House Xorlarrin, is a drow."



Drow! It was as if someone poured ice water over Demascus's head. As much as he disliked vampires, he hated drow more. And why hadn't he immediately realized it? The spiders, the woman's head on an arachnid, the

promise of vengeance from the queen of the Demonweb Pits … Drow …

A memory bubbled up, swamping his senses with a vision of a vast underground space. An endless vault, purple-lit by phosphorescent fungi and drifting sparks. Massive towers carved from living stone, each the width of entire surface towns, forming a darkling city of fey-like grandeur and sick horror. Screams from sacrificial victims, synchronized to the tolling of passing hours, chasing each other through the massive hollow.

Demascus strode in the vanguard of a great army of dwarves that poured from a freshly burrowed fissure into the vault. Summoned light streamed around him, bright as day, in spearlike shafts of brilliance that stabbed the drow-infested space. The sacrificial screams faltered. The invading army, determined to exterminate the evil fey pocket, surged down the avenues between the towers. Demascus lifted *Exorcessum* and charged ahead. Directly into an ambush. Thousands of slave warriors poured from the side streets, all screaming in one voice. Spider centaurs called driders—ebony-skinned elf from the waist up and massive spider below—fought at the head of each slave phalanx. Drow sorcerers in the hundreds launched crackling shafts of lighting from high balconies.

And from the shadows directly overhead, a web gondola descended, supported from the spinnerets of a spider so colossal it defied reason. Three women rode the conveyance. Their elegant ebony limbs were wrapped in precious jewels and silks, and each bore the holy symbol of the patron of Lolth. The Queen of the Demonweb Pits.

“Hey!” came Riltana’s concerned voice. “What’s wrong?”

Demascus blinked. The vision of the drow vault shattered, and he was back in the too-warm and damp confines of Raneger’s receiving room. “I just remembered where I heard the term ‘Queen of the Demonweb Pits’ before.”

Raneger said, “Don’t speak her name.” Jaul and Riltana looked confused. Chant’s eyes widened as if he understood the reference.

Demascus fixed Raneger with his regard and said, his voice cold, “What did you agree to?”

He knew Raneger was a criminal, but if the supernaturally fat watersoul was dealing with drow, that made him a blackguard of the worst sort. Someone who Demascus would have to—

“To aid them in one very small way. I didn’t agree to any drow foolishness regarding their goddess—I wouldn’t do anything that would endanger Akanûl’s interests, especially when dark elves are involved.”

Riltana snorted, but he pretended not to hear her. Demascus believed Raneger. No one profits under the thrall of dark elves, not even miscreants like the crime lord. “So exactly what *did* you do for them?”

“I provided a location for them to store their cargo, that’s all. A location secure against scrying and peacemaker inspections. Nothing else, and nothing I haven’t done for others. This was three tendays ago. In return, I was supposed to receive a tidy sum, not to mention a nugget or two of arambarium for my trouble.”

“And what happened?”

“Pashra missed his first payment three days ago. When I sent some muscle over to collect my due, they were rebuffed. I sent a larger squad over today—and Pashra was gone.”

Warmth suddenly fled the air, and Demascus could see his breath steaming in the cold.

“Since you know about arambarium,” Raneger continued, “I can only assume you’re an agent of the crown in this matter. They’re wondering what has happened to the mineral’s production out at the island, yes? You’re employed by one of the stewards, presumably?”

“Something like that,” Demascus allowed. Raneger probably thought he was working for Tradrem Kethtrod, Steward of Earth—the intelligence-gathering master for the realm. Good; no need to disabuse the genasi of his incorrect notion.

Some warmth trickled back into the receiving room. “And you’ve come here, hoping we can pool our resources on this matter, as the Crown and I have done before.”

What? thought Demascus. No, don’t react. Though he promised himself to bring that tidbit up with Arathane next time he saw her. Aloud, with as much conviction as he could muster, he said, “Exactly.”

Raneger stared at him. Demascus returned his look, holding eye contact. Suddenly Demascus wondered if Raneger’s claim to have previously worked for the Throne of Majesty had been a test.

Chant stepped forward and clapped. “So! All of us want to catch the thieves. See how reasonable we all are? How we are *not* so juvenile as to let our mutual aims evaporate in a stare-off?”

Demascus laughed. Raneger blinked and gave a slow nod. Jaul audibly loosed a held breath. Some dolt on the far side of the chamber clapped, sensing easing tensions in relaxing body language.

“Your name in Pashra’s warehouse led me here.”

“You’re amazingly stupid,” said Raneger “What if I’m working hand-in-glove with the drow and Pashra? You’d be dead.”

“I’d rather think, ‘amazingly sure of myself.’ ”

Riltana snorted again.

Not her best attribute, Demascus thought.

The criminal watersoul turned idly in his pool, this time avoiding soaking everyone standing on the tiles. “I’m only even considering giving you this information because I trust you will use it to find Pashra and deal with him.”

“That is our charge,” said Demascus.

Raneger made a face, as if cooperation itself pained him. “Then listen. Pashra, for all his power, is merely a pawn of the drow Chenraya of House Xorlarrin. He and the drow are only loosely allied; they each want the arambarium for their own purposes. Chenraya wants it to help empower some scheme of Lolth’s.”

“Lolth!” said Jaul and Riltana almost simultaneously.

So much for not speaking her name, Demascus thought. “I squashed a spider with a drow female’s head,” he suddenly offered. “You don’t suppose I’ve already dealt with Chenraya, and it’s all over but for rounding up Pashra and the missing cargo?”

Raneger said, “A drow priestess of Chenraya’s power is capable of exerting her strength through a variety of homunculi. If you didn’t destroy her actual body, all you did was deprive her of a tool.”

Demascus sighed. “I figured.”

“I thought drow nested in subterranean cities in northern Faerûn. How did one get here?” asked Jaul.

“By ship, across the Sea of Fallen Stars, I’d guess,” said Chant. “Might take a little while—”

“No, the boy is correct,” said Raneger. “Pashra and Chenraya know a shortcut across Faerûn to whatever subterranean dark elf city she operates from. I’ve bent all my resources to discover it. Finding a portal with such range might be even more valuable than arambarium.”

“Let me guess,” said Demascus. “You want our help finding it?”

“I do.”

The deva rubbed his chin. “You know, I came across an interesting name in Pashra’s effects. Ever heard of the Gatekeeper?”



“Jaul,” came Raneger’s watery voice, “Tell your friends to wait outside. I’d like a word.”

Jaul stopped. Now what? He had to use the privy. Besides, Raneger had already verbally slapped him down, in front of his father and everyone. Jaul couldn't imagine how a private castigation could be any worse. Of course, just because he couldn't imagine it didn't mean Raneger didn't have something nasty in mind to punish Jaul for bringing strangers unannounced to his court.

Jaul's father, preceded by Demascus and Riltana, paused at the exit. The pawnbroker frowned at Jaul, obviously worried.

"Go on, Pa," Jaul said, and waved him forward. "I'll be right out. Master Raneger and I just got to take care of a few things. Den of Games stuff, you know."

"We'll be waiting outside," Chant said darkly.

"Great. Way to make me feel like a five-year-old."

Chant gave an exasperated shake of his head and left.

Why did his father have to be that way? Never admitting that anything Jaul did had any worth, as if all Jaul's choices were bad. Oh, it burned him up!

He stomped over to the basin's edge.

"Yes, Master Raneger? Sorry about letting those clods in on such short notice—"

"Jaul, I've already put that behind me. In fact, I wanted you to stay back because I wanted to let you know I overreacted. I apologize."

"You … apologize?"

Raneger chuckled. His heaving chest sent ripples over the basin's edge.

"What, boy, you think my ego is so large that I can't admit when I'm wrong?"

Jaul had thought exactly that, but he decided maybe now wasn't the time to say so. Instead he said, "Well, I'm sorry, too, for not following the protocol. It was only my father and his friends …" He stopped himself from lapsing into making excuses.

“I’m glad you brought them into my court. If you hadn’t, a fabulous opportunity might have slipped past. Thanks to you, that didn’t happen. You’re an asset to my organization, Jaul. And after today, I’ve begun to think you’re an invaluable one.”

Jaul couldn’t help but smile at the praise. How he’d longed to hear just that sort of encouragement his whole life. To be gratefully recognized by Raneger was something he’d always hoped might happen. And here it was!

“Your father, Chant, much as I appreciate his secrets network, failed to notify me that a deva named Demascus was operating in Akanûl. Not only operating, but working hand in glove with your father! Not that I have anything against Chant, of course, but perhaps his friendship with this Demascus blinded him to the deva’s potential importance.”

Jaul had heard Chant call Demascus a deva before, but had never troubled himself to ask what a deva was; he tended to discount anything his father said as a matter of personal policy. Probably not the best time to admit his ignorance to the crime lord on that subject, either. Instead he said, “And the importance of this stolen arambarium?”

“Indeed, I have not forgotten about the arambarium, the drow, and the portal! Which is the other reason I asked you to stay behind. Like I said, Jaul, you’re an asset to my organization. But you’re more than that. I’ve had my eye on you. You can think on your feet. You’re tough. And you know a thing or two about how things work in Airspur.”

Jaul tried not to let his grin swell too large.

“You’re going places. If you play your cards right, I can see you as one of my lieutenants. Someone I can trust. Someone who’ll look out for me, just like I’ll look out for you. How’s that sound?”

“It sounds … wonderful, Master Raneger.” Was he dreaming this? He glanced at the tattoos on his wrists that marked his acceptance into the organization. They’d meant a lot before, but now their significance was redoubled.

“All right, then. Accompany your father and his friends to find this portal, as we agreed before they left. Help them like you’d help me. Try not to anger your father just because you can, eh? But remember—I look forward to hearing everything you learn, no matter how insignificant the detail, or how secret. Clear?”

Jaul nodded vigorously. “Deal!” He bowed and made for the exit, his heart aglow with possibilities.

“One more thing, Jaul.”

“Yes?”

“Keep what we’ve discussed between just you and me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL
18 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

"CHENRAYA," CAME A DEEP VOICE. "WHY MUST YOU LEAVE a litter of corpses wherever you go?"

Chenraya Xorlarrin frowned. She turned to face Lord Pashra, taking care to avoid the expanding pool of blood leaking from the still-twitching servitor.

"It's no concern of yours," she replied.

The blue-skinned oni glared, as if he had the authority to demand her answer.

He was one male she'd grown *particularly* tired of. At first, it hadn't seemed so bad; he wasn't a drow.

"Is it not?" he finally asked. But drow or not, she decided, the oni's usefulness was fast drawing to a close. If it wasn't for Pashra's special knowledge concerning the arambarium, she would've already whispered the same dread word of arcane magic to him that she'd just used on the ettercap servitor. Even though it was created by men, it was a lovely spell … but it tasted filthy in her mouth. She'd learned it from a Bregan D'aerthe mercenary the Matron Mother had pressed upon her. Spells had their uses, even those fashioned by males. Matron Mother Zeerith, head of House Xolarrin, perhaps wasn't entirely mad to accept opinions and input from the male drow of her house. Indeed, Lolth had commanded her daughters in every house to learn something of the magic that men wove in their stinking academies. Doing so would advance the Spider Queen's new goal. A wondrous objective, though its potential implications left Chenraya unsettled.

“Are you drugged?” said Pashra, shaking her out of her reverie. “Why was it necessary to remove this ettercap’s heart and set it flopping on the floor?” The oni gave the dying organ a kick.

“Simple pleasures, Lord Pashra,” Chenraya replied. “They’re what get us through.” She bared her teeth—perhaps the oni would choose to interpret it as a smile—and mentally promised herself the treat of removing one of Pashra’s vital organs as well. Soon.

Openly she had gave praise to Lolth’s new direction and accepted her Matron Mother’s commands. Zeerith’s policy of tolerating males might even put the Fifth House of Menzoberranzan in the vanguard, and should Lolth’s plan succeed, all the daughters of House Xorlorrin would reap the benefits. But, sadly, so would all the sons.

“Besides, we have an army of ettercap servitor-slaves. A few here and there aren’t worth your concern.”

“Yes, priestess, but hardly any of them are with us. Most of them are out at the dig, an inconvenient distance from the nexus.” The oni gestured along the winding corridor of webbing that stretched into the dimness, the newest endpoint hub of the Demonweb.

The oni had a point. Damn it. And he had become less respectful and more critical. Connecting this leg of the Spider Queen’s network in Akanûl had been a triumph, given the Demonweb’s recent and troubling instability. She’d had to locate an endpoint that wouldn’t immediately collapse under the strain when the connection was made. Unfortunately, no such endpoints existed out on the island. That would have been *too* convenient. Apparently the Spider Queen didn’t believe in making life easy for her followers. Chenraya supposed she was lucky she’d found any endpoint at all.

Which meant that transporting the prize still required secrecy and finesse. At least time was on their side. Thanks to false information fed by a couple of well-placed spies to

the Akanûl “intelligence” branch, the mining disruption was being blamed on a hostile foreign nation. This had allowed her to do with the mine as she pleased. Diverting the initial scraps of arambarium had been just the first step, of course. A test. The true mother lode had yet to be seized, thanks to one last group of hold-out genasi defenders in the mine’s heart. They needed to be dealt with soon. After they were quashed, it would all be hers. And to transport it, and indeed her entire force of servitor slaves, she’d devised a special surprise, praise Lolth.

“The Throne of Majesty knows about us,” said Pashra.

“No, Pashra. We’ve been over this—”

“They’ve found the warehouse. They know arambarium was shipped through it. How long before the Throne sends an army to the island? We can overcome the occasional spy or strike force, but not an entire troop of peacemakers.”

“Why are you wasting my time repeating these things?” asked Chenraya.

The oni said something curt and explosive in an unfamiliar language. But she recognized the tone. Then he said, “Humor me. What if, despite everything we’ve done, the Stewards are actually on to us?”

This was growing tiresome. Perhaps if I lay it out to him, as I would to a girl child who had not yet reached five years … “Listen, I’ll say this only once more. The Throne of Majesty is closer to learning the truth, yes. But they’re also in turmoil. The queen remains unengaged, hiding in her royal suite. The Stewards are convinced Tymanther is the author of their misfortune. Yes, the pale-skinned warrior and windsoul in the warehouse were remarkably capable compared to earlier spies. Eventually, yes, they’ll learn what we’ve really been up to. But by then it’ll be too late.”

“How can you be so certain? Did you see what they were capable of? What if they track us to the Demonweb endpoint, or visit the mine before we’ve unearthed the relic?”

Chenraya sighed. “The mine swarms with the balance of my slave-soldiers, my harem of arachnids, and a company of reanimated miners. Should any spy manage to defeat all those threats, the deadfall I’ve devised will smash even a small army of peacemakers to paste. Or anyone *else* that displeases me.”

The oni frowned. He understood her implicit threat.

“What about here? I see no defenses. If they get past the Guardian—”

“The Demonweb will rouse if nondrow should dare tread its paths. It’s a manifestation of Lolth’s mind, after all. The only reason *you* haven’t been ripped to shreds by swarming spiders is because I’ve granted you safe passage. Pray I never have cause to lift that protection. So, actually, I hope the spies do find us here. It’ll be their very last success.”



“Not that damned smell again,” said Riltana.

Demascus glanced into the intersecting passage ahead. Fluid slithered down the corridor like a snake made of feces. He wrinkled his nose. Chant came up even with Demascus and Riltana. His sunrod cast additional light on the putrid scene. Behind the pawnbroker trudged Jaul, who kept one hand clutched on his dagger hilt.

The kid shouldn’t be here, Demascus thought. But including Chant’s son was a condition Raneger insisted on before cooperating any further.

“Maybe we can give this tunnel a pass,” said Riltana.

Demascus studied the marked-up map Raneger had provided. “I think we need to check it out,” he said.

“Listen,” she replied. “What’re the odds this’ll be the one that goes to the Gatekeeper? The last six were a bust. Wait, I’ll answer my own question: Odds are low. Let’s avoid the shit-road and check out the next passage.”

“I agree with her,” said Jaul.

Riltana flashed Jaul a sugary smile. The kid returned an unabashed grin, his eyes sparkling.

Oh, great, thought Demascus. Jaul was setting himself up for a fall if he thought Riltana might have any interest in him whatsoever. The thief still carried a torch for Carmenere that wasn't going out anytime soon. But Riltana wasn't above flirting. Charisma was just another tool in her bag of tricks. Chant started to speak, maybe to disagree with his son. But he coughed instead. A fake cough.

Demascus suppressed a sigh. He saw how it was going to be. And it wasn't like he wanted to wade in ankle-deep sewer water either, but …

"We *could* turn aside," said Demascus. "But these leads are arranged, according to Raneger, by order of relative likelihood. He's already got squads running down other clues. Finding this so-called 'Gatekeeper' is our best bet for tracking the oni and drow. So I'd rather not waste time on less-likely options. And anyway, Jaul …"

The kid looked away from Riltana and blinked. "What?"

"You're Raneger's proxy. Do you think he'd be all right with us choosing at our whim, or do you think he'd rather we go in the order he indicated?"

Demascus thrust the map into Jaul's hands. Jaul dropped his gaze to the parchment, then to Riltana, then to Demascus. He rubbed at the tattoo of wave and dagger on his left wrist.

"Well … Um. I suppose we … should follow the order Master Raneger wanted …"

The thief frowned. "If I get crap on my favorite steel-toed boots, some leech-son is going to be sorry."

Demascus swallowed a smart comeback. He sensed Riltana wasn't merely being dramatic. The last time she'd been in the Catacombs, with his stolen scarf in hand, she'd almost died.

“I knew tunnels were under these cliffs,” Jaul said, “But I didn’t imagine so many.”

“They go on farther and deeper than anyone knows,” replied Chant. “Leftover from a series of previous excavations, before the genasi came. If we’d entered closer to the bay, we would’ve had to spend hours detouring around haunted cemetery tunnels and a detachment of peacemakers.”

“I wish we were far enough in not to have the deal with city runoff,” Riltana said. “What the Hells are people eating up there?”

“The sewage either ends up down here, or in the bay,” said Chant. “Most people prefer down here.”

“You sure seem to know a lot about waste runoff,” said the windsoul. Jaul chuckled.

Demascus said, “Stop fixating on the smell, Riltana. Besides, it’s working in our favor; the majority of tomb robbers turn around when they see something like this.”

“Except for those too stupid to take a hint.”

Demascus took a breath and held it before entering the corridor. He tried his best to skirt the liquid burbling down its center.

Chant followed. Despite the man’s bulk, he managed to sound light on his feet.

“You next,” he heard Riltana tell the kid. “I’ll take rear guard. I want to be farthest away from Demascus, in case he triggers some sort of crap slide.”

They followed the stream.

After a while the pawnbroker said, “They say these deep paths open on crystal caverns, sunless seas, and fungus forests hung with carnivorous vines. Or even—”

“Everyone knows those stories, Pa,” said Jaul.

“Ah, do they now?”

“They do,” said Riltana. “Sorry.”

Demascus laughed. “Even *I’ve* heard them. And my memory isn’t—”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it,” said Chant. The pawnbroker gave a long-suffering sigh.

The deva raised his hand for quiet. The sunrod showed the far end of the tunnel where the trickle of waste water fell away into a fissure. And beyond that, the rutted path gave way to cut gray stone. This was promising. At least *something* was here, unlike each of the previous leads on Raneger’s map.

Demascus moved soundlessly forward. The light spread into an open, square space, like a courtyard. Overlapping vertical slabs of smooth stone on the far side of the area narrowed down to a single arch filled with orange haze. Demascus could just make out a stand-alone structure beyond the mist that partly protruded from the cavern’s far wall. The stone roof of the structure was unbroken gray stone, curved like a gargantuan turtle’s shell.

“What kind of building is that?” said Jaul.

Demascus put a finger to his lips, and advanced. An odor reminiscent of rusted iron wafted through the room, ruffling his hair in a light breeze. He stopped. So did the breeze. He was almost halfway across the courtyard when he noticed that the sand scattered across it possessed two distinct shades—gray-black and brown-black—in a spiral arcing pattern that moved outward from a single point just a couple of feet in front of him.

He crouched down and traced a finger along a curve. The discontinuity between the lighter and darker colored streaks was sharp. The design must be recent—it would’ve been blurred if any appreciable amount of time had passed since its creation.

“Is anyone here?” he said, standing.

A sigh like wind through a desert was his answer.

“If you’re the Gatekeeper, show me the gate! We’re looking for drow!”

It turned out Raneger *had* heard of the Gatekeeper—someone or something left over from before the Spellplague

crashed most of Faerûn's magical portals. It had been the guardian of a nexus used by Chondathan merchants, before Chondath's scattering of city-states was destroyed by a chunk of genasi-infested Abeir.

Demascus wanted to complete Arathane's commission. But if they found the Gatekeeper and a working portal system, he wasn't about to give Master Raneger access to it.

The breeze returned, with the sound of air shuddering across empty dunes. This time, a whisper, too. It sounded like, "Drow?"

His neck prickled. Something unseen was in the room with them. "Yes," he replied to the presence. "Have you allowed dark elves through your gate? Or a large blue creature?"

The wind stiffened. The spiral of dust lifted from the floor, becoming a haze of whirling arms composed of black sand. They were so long they spanned nearly the entire chamber. Demascus covered his eyes with one hand and staggered backward.

Then the gale roared like an awakened lion. He separated his fingers and looked through slitted eyes to see the dust devil draw its arms in, increasing its speed and density. It collapsed into a howling pillar of darkness, around which hunted hungry arcs of lightning. Silence smothered the room, except for the sound of Jaul's too-rapid breaths.

The sand was gone, as was the dust-devil. What remained was a shape almost twice as tall as a man, made of glass-sharp obsidian splinters. Its face was a shivering, flexing nest of black stone shards.

"Son of a piss-pickled leech," said Riltana.

"You can say that again," Demascus agreed.

"It's a golem, I think," said Chant. "A magical construct."

"All right, Lord Obvious," Riltana said, "How do we make friends with it?"

The golem said something. Hundreds of stone splinters rubbed and clacked together. The effect made Demascus want to sick up on the cavern floor.

“What? I don’t understand.”

The golem spoke again. This time, Demascus heard, “I abide.”

Jaul pointed at the construct. “It’s gotta be the Gatekeeper.”

Demascus shot Jaul a look.

“I see,” he said. “Are you indeed the Gatekeeper?”

“I am. The gate is functional once more.”

“Once more? That’s good, I suppose. Did you allow through any drow? Or an oni? We’re looking for them.”

“The drow woman repaired the way. It is to her I now give fealty. Are you her servant, too?”

Gods of shadow, that was a complication! But … He shrugged and said, “Why, *yes*. Yes, we’re her servants. Please open the link for us, so that we may follow our lady.”

“Opening the gate is the function for which I was fashioned,” said the golem. Demascus couldn’t look it in the face when it spoke—the movement and sound together continued to make him queasy.

“I shall open the proper conduit, once you—”

“Conduit?” said Chant.

“The ways beyond the link were originally fixed and few,” said the obsidian golem. “But with the repair by Chenraya Xorlarrin, the possible routes have become … chaotic. It would be easy to get lost in the web of passages that now open from this door.”

The golem stopped speaking. Without eyes, it was difficult to tell where the thing’s regard rested, but Demascus got the feeling it was waiting for something. “You said you were going to open the conduit?”

“Once you speak aloud the pass phrase of dispensation.”

A pass phrase? Shadow take it! He tried, “Chenraya indicated you’d tell *us* the pass phrase.” Demascus suspected it wasn’t a particularly good lie, but how smart could this animate chunk of obsidian be?

The golem cocked its head like a bird catching sight of a particularly choice worm in the grass. Was the golem buying his line? The thing's body language was impossible to read. Was it about to step back and usher them toward the arch? Or was it—

The golem slammed its hands together. A fistclap of sound and obsidian shrapnel exploded outward, catching Demascus in the thunderous wave front. He tumbled feet over head. It was like he was underwater, struggling in a current, and didn't know which way was up. Then the back cavern wall batted him out of the air. He couldn't hear anything or feel anything except a body-wide tingle that quickly became an all-over ache. Shapes flashed before his eyes, but they were out of focus. His sense of time suffered …

Something not good was happening in the cavern, he knew that. The golem had pierced his bluff, and then some. He realized he was slick with sweat, as if all the water in his body had decided to escape. Why was he just lying here? Demascus gritted his teeth. He tried to lever himself up the wall. Ouch! He wished the tingles would come back. He slid back down. Low, rumbling noises grumbled in his ear, as if he was deep underwater listening to a fight raging just above the surface.

His eyes finally focused. Riltana was facing the obsidian golem alone! She whirled like a snowflake in a wind flurry, just out of reach of the construct's massive fists. But lines of blood painted on her exposed limbs and face showed that merely being near the creature's razor-sharp body was slowly slicing the thief to ribbons.

Three bolts slammed into the construct's side, splintering the black stone. Chant was still up and part of the fight, he realized. As he himself should be! Demascus struggled to pull himself up again …

Someone hauled him upright. Who? Jaul. The kid's mouth moved, but the deva couldn't hear anything. He nodded

anyway and said, “Thanks.” The sound of his own voice was one more unintelligible rumble.

Demascus drew *Exorcessum*. The runes along the blade immediately flickered to life, red and white. “Help me,” he said.

A white rune flared. His body-wide ache faded. The clash of combat invaded his ears once more. Then the rune went dark. The one next to it, the one that had cleansed his blood of spider venom in the warehouse yesterday, was also still dark. Odd. Weren’t they supposed to … renew themselves? He shrugged, and decided to save that worry for later.

Demascus careened back toward the golem, sword in one hand. His other whipped the scarf from around his neck, so that the far end grazed the golem, but failed to grasp a raised arm as he’d intended.

The obsidian humanoid was still trying to mash the thief. Demascus rushed up on its opposite flank and jammed his sword deep into the thing’s core. It convulsed and shrieked like a caged drake poked with a stick.

Riltana yelled, “There you are! Why do you always lie down when things get serious?”

“Because your wit tires me out,” he said, hauling back on this sword. It didn’t budge.

Exorcessum was stuck!

The golem wheeled, yanking the sword out of his hands. Stone shards abraded the deva’s face and outstretched hand. Demascus evaded a hammer fist of black stone. Lords of light, what the Hells had he been thinking? Slashing strikes were better than extended lunges, even for live targets—less exposure to a counterattack. And for a creature composed of animate stone, he might as well have gift-wrapped his sword before he slammed it point first into the golem’s obsidian body.

Another of Chant’s bolts stuck the Gatekeeper’s face. It didn’t care. Despite the damage the pawnbroker and thief had already inflicted, its attention was fixed on Demascus.

Apparently it was put out that Demascus had gotten back up.

“It really doesn’t like you,” yelled Riltana, as the golem chased him down.

Retreating, Demascus replied, “You think?”

If he could summon his—

The golem “screamed” in his face, rubbing its head-splinters together so rapidly it looked like a hive of swarming bees. The sound hit him like a club.

For a moment, he saw two golems winding up to deliver a massive punch. Two Riltanas shot him a worried glance. He couldn’t distinguish the floor from the walls. Then his vision snapped back to true, but not soon enough. He wasn’t going to be able to avoid the stone fist hurtling at his head … Except he did, swaying under the golem’s half-ton haymaker like a tree in the wind.

Riltana seemed pinned to the air. Two of Chant’s bolts inched forward like slugs through air thick as clear jelly. Jaul’s slack-jawed expression of surprise, as he stood in the doorway, was graven as if in clay.

Demascus had produced a catch in time. The tables had just turned, though the Gatekeeper didn’t yet know it. Mounting bliss painted everything a sort of glowing orange, like right before sunrise. Time to end this thing.

The deva gazed into the shadows that suddenly welcomed him, whispering their secrets. He took hold of the wavering profile of the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge. He let its moth-wing sheen fall over the Gatekeeper. Points of light shone out. They summarized the golem’s being to the deva’s practiced eye. Its strengths were obvious. Its weaknesses were nearly nonexistent. But every creature, even a monster of animate stone, is tied to the world in some fashion.

And then Demascus saw the emerald flower of light that pulsed in the Gatekeeper’s chest. It was where the power of the golem’s animation was fixed; a magical “heart” of sorts. No, that wasn’t quite right. For there were *two* emerald

flowers. And to fold this creature instantly into death's embrace, Demascus would have to simultaneously pierce both. Difficult, to say the least.

First things first, he told himself. Before time's gears renewed their clacking pace. He darted in, under the still-outstretched arms of the Gatekeeper, coming up behind where he'd planted *Exorcessum*. He draped the Veil around his neck, then snagged the hilt with both hands. Like a wagon precariously balanced atop a hill, where the slightest touch could launch its headlong rush, time raced back into dizzying motion at the contact. Demascus clung to the side of a creature made of razor-sharp rock and hauled on a sword so damnably long it might as well have been nailed into the Gatekeeper purposefully. There was no way he was going to get the sword out! It was jammed in too deep. In its current configuration, he would have to call upon the strength of …

In its current configuration? What an odd notion.

"Demascus!" screamed Riltana. "Let go! That thing'll slice you to bloody strips!"

She was right about that. But … *Exorcessum's* length had always struck him as absurd. And wasn't it funny how its runes were calming white along one side and savage red along the other? As if they represented an unhappy compromise between two opposing ideals? Two sets of runes. On a blade two sizes too big. Hm.

The Gatekeeper ceased thrashing. It turned until the side of its body where the deva clung was lined up with the closest wall. Demascus realized it was going to throw itself against the stone and use his body as a cushion.

Now or never, he thought. He relaxed his grip on the hilt. Instead of trying to pull the blade straight out, he imagined pulling the hilt apart, separating the sword into—

Exorcessum split with a report like a cannon shot. The Gatekeeper's body reverberated as if it had swallowed an exploding fireball. It stumbled and dropped to one knee.

Demascus remained standing. He gripped two swords. Scarlet runes writhed in murderous glee down the blade in his right hand. White sigils like angel’s wings graced the one in his left. In their mixed light, Demascus smiled.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL
18 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

UNEXPECTED PAIN YANKED A GASP FROM MADRI. HAD twin daggers just punched into her temples? Where she was, what she'd been doing—it all swirled away from her in a volcanic eruption of agony. She opened her mouth to scream in earnest …

And closed it again. It wasn't pain. Well, yes, it hurt something terrible, but so did seeing the sunrise after days spent blindfolded.

Something was different. Her mind was … freer. As unexpectedly as if someone had opened a door, she became more *herself*. She was Madri, plenipotentiary of Halruaa. Whether ghost, or reconstructed figment, or some hybrid of both, she knew suddenly and with full conviction … she was real.

A genasi in a green tunic stared at her with surprise plain in his wide eyes and flared nostrils. "Where'd you come from?" he asked. He was a docent for the Netheril exhibit she'd been viewing before whatever had just happened … happened. And he saw her, when a moment ago she'd been only a shade to his perception.

She laughed. "I'm a stowaway. I survived the shipwreck of a deva's incarnation."

The docent frowned, clearly confused. He coughed. "I'm going to have to see your pass."

"I don't have one. I'm not even really alive, you see."

The genasi paused, obviously wondering what he should do about this crazy woman. Madri laughed again. She couldn't help it; she felt drunk.

“Madam, please, don’t make me call the peacemakers …” She wondered if she should fear a peacemaker’s sword? It probably wasn’t the best time to experiment. She should—

Flicker.

The dimness of the secret crypt greeted her. The painting, chair, bottomless fissure, and the heap of earth were as silent and still as ever. The mask was nowhere in evidence. It could come and go, apparently with a thought, or as so often happened to her, with a yearning. Had it heard her talking to the Necromancer? She shrugged. More important things occupied her mind. Like, what’d just happened to her?

She flopped into the chair and studied the draped painting. Had her talk with what lay beneath borne fruit so quickly? She didn’t see how. She hadn’t fulfilled any of the grisly requirements the thing had described. Madri shuddered. Striking out on her own wasn’t going to be as simple as she’d hoped. Her soul would be stained if she accepted the Necromancer’s help, and she hadn’t yet decided if she was willing to descend to those depths to ensure her independence from Kalkan and Fossil. So, if not the painting, then what? Demascus must have done something. Somehow, the deva had managed to mentally jab her from who knew how far away. She closed her eyes, considering, while at the same time trying her damnedest to avoid flicking across space to wherever he was. She didn’t want to see him again until she had to.

She could sense a faint connection to something not in the room. A line of silvery light, snaking off into nothingness. Well, that was too simplistic, but it was how she imagined her connection to … the deva? To his sword? It was brighter than before, more tangible. More real …

“That rotten snake-licking heartless bastard!” she screamed, surprising herself at the abruptness of her rage. Why? Why had the deva killed her? She *still* didn’t know. Fossil had declined to explain. It was only interested in describing how, by becoming part of Kalkan’s plan, she

could have vengeance. How many murder victims ever get that kind of opportunity? Damn few. So, Fossil had intimated, she should just be grateful and stop asking questions that didn't bear on the plan.

Madri stood. She faced the draped frame and gathered her courage.

The velvet drape felt like cold blood against her fingers as she flipped it aside. The face was waiting. It could just barely be described as a face. The multitude of shattered portraits, jammed together to form a single entity abiding in apparent unceasing agony, met her gaze with mismatched eyes. Its gaping mouth was like a wound. The frozen vista of paint snared the visage in cruel brush strokes.

"Necromancer," she said, "Your specialty is death. Why did Demascus kill me?"

The two-dimensional mouth squirmed. The painting whispered. Her stomach lurched.

"… the Sword serves only those to whom Fate is an ally …"

"That makes no sense! Fate wants … wanted me dead?" Her confusion commingled with the nausea that seeing the painting induced. And her headache was back. Unlike before, it didn't break down the doors of perception; the pain seemed like a live thing, chewing on her brain from inside her skull.

"… the Sword may also serve those who can bend Fate, or deceive it with a tapestry of interlocking lies …" The pain was unspeakable. Her memory of Demascus, telling her again how sorry he was before he broke her neck, danced and mixed with the crazy-quilt image of the Necromancer.

She screamed. The draping fell back over the painting. She dropped into a shuddering fit.

The pain … was receding. She found herself with her face pressed against the dirt floor. The sour smell of grave dirt was literally in her nose. She rolled onto her side. The Necromancer hadn't answered her question. Instead, it'd

whispered some nonsense about Fate. She rubbed her temple. It'd also said something about lies—

"Why are you lying on the floor?" A silver mask floated into her field of vision. Fossil was home. It'd apparently missed her conversation with the whispering painting. The thing was a manipulating liar, first and foremost, but it was also ruthless. If it thought she was going behind its back, it would act. She was still safe, but she'd have to be more careful in the future.

Madri pulled herself into the chair. She smoothed her hair and said, "Pain like an avalanche overwhelmed me." She swaddled the lie around the truth with expert delicacy.

The mask vibrated a moment, perhaps with excitement. Though how could one tell with an inexpressive silvery facade? It could have been confusion just as easily, or fear.

"So," Fossil finally uttered. "Kalkan's prophecy has nearly run its course."

She waited only a heartbeat before giving Fossil what he wanted, and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"The Swordbreaker saw far. But even his *damos* isn't infallible. Despite its marvelous reach, Kalkan couldn't foresee whether Demascus would discover his sword has more than a single configuration. Your genesis, Madri, as an unquiet spirit, lies in the power *Exorcessum* generated when Demascus retrieved it. You are both memory and spirit, a figment-ghost."

Fossil's words overstuffed her head with knowledge. What sort of gods-abandoned nonsense was the relic spouting—about her being undead after all, except not really? And …

"What's a *damos?*" she said.

"A relic of the Imaskar empire. A portal that vouchsafes the future course of history to its owner who is willing to risk its venomous shackle. The *damos* is what Kalkan used to devise Demascus's route into dissolution and ultimate defeat. But we've finally reached the frayed ends of Kalkan's original *damos*-derived prophecy. He foresaw the possibility that

Demascus would discover how to split his sword into two blades. If that happened—and it has—then everything becomes a bit … touch and go.”

It was too much to understand. Madri wished she had parchment and quill so she could take notes. Future course of history? Two blades in one? Touch-and-go prophecy?

Time to wrest the course of conversation back herself while Fossil was in a talkative mood. “Wait. You said I’m both a spirit *and* a memory? How can that be?”

“Do not concern yourself. It does not matter what you are, does it? All that matters is that we execute our plan to bring Demascus down.”

“I … suppose you’re right,” she said. Though it did matter. Her odds of coming out of this with something more than ashes after they dealt with Demascus depended on her true status. Or so the Necromancer had whispered. She couldn’t press too hard for that particular truth. If Fossil suspected she was lining up her own agenda, the relic angel would “erase” her and begin anew, as it suggested had happened before. Unless that was just a lie to keep her in line …

“Well, tell me more about this *damos*, then. Where is it?”

The mask rotated toward the heap of earth. “In there with Kalkan’s regenerating shell.”

A surge of excitement drew Madri to her feet. “It’s right here? If Kalkan used it to create a prophecy that saw all of us this far into the future, let’s dig it out and use it again, right now. We’ll just tell this ‘damos’ that the sword split after all, whatever that means, and have it start a new prophecy from there!”

The mask settled its hollow regard on her, saying nothing.

“What, now you’re back to giving me the silent treatment? You know, we’d get on so much better if you’d just be honest. Like you keep saying, Fossil, we both want the same thing.” Except, what was it the Necromancer had whispered, right before she’d collapsed? Something about lies motivating Demascus to accept a commission involving her.

But what of it? No exonerating evidence would ever change the fact he *had* killed her. Of course, she wanted to know why, whatever the answer was … why Demascus had wrapped his fingers around her head and *twisted*.

Fossil's voice broke into her reverie. "True enough, figment. We want the same thing. And were it possible to craft a new prophecy now that Demascus has rediscovered how to switch between the most brutish shape of his blade and a more adaptable configuration, I would consider it. But it won't work. Only a living creature can call on the Voice of Tomorrow. Neither of us qualify."

"I guess that'd be too easy." She snorted. "Just out of idle curiosity, how many configurations does Demascus's gods-abandoned sword have, anyhow?" The more she heard about the blade, the more she wished she'd had something like it when she'd been plenipotentiary to Halruaa. She'd had to undertake more than a couple of tasks in her country's defense that could have benefited from a divinely amorphous weapon.

"It is not recorded. More than two. An assassin's weapon must be versatile. Kalkan Swordbreaker once claimed even gods should fear *Exorcessum's* final configuration."

"Why?"

"Only one thing is as strong as that explosive configuration: the flame that burns at the heart of a star."

Oh. Madri imagined a celestial fire touching down in the heart of Airspur, a blaze so hot it would melt even a god's flesh from its bones. Such potency, once unleashed, would race out in all directions, burning even the air …

She put her hand to her mouth and closed her eyes. No one should have that kind of power. "But that would kill Demascus, too."

"Only for a time."

"It's madness—what demented deity gave such a weapon into one man's hands?" she demanded, suddenly angry at the incongruity of it all.

“Gods, not those of Toril, fabricated the implements for the deva Demascus. When he came to Toril, the gods here created a counterbalance—Kalkan Swordbreaker. Though what we propose to do now goes beyond Kalkan’s original remit. We shall *permanently* deal with Demascus.”

Being permanently dealt with was what Demascus deserved. How many other innocent people had he killed, deluded by the same force that had turned him against her? If she had any second thoughts about her vendetta, learning about the “final configuration” convinced her that the deva must be put down for good. She didn’t know exactly how Kalkan planned to do it, but apparently her involvement was somehow important. Maybe even critical … something Fossil had said earlier, about having to “start over” with her, as if having the help of just any half-ghost, half-figment wouldn’t do. Kalkan and the relic angel needed *her*. Someone who’d been betrayed and killed by Demascus himself. Curious. She promised herself to give it more thought.

“You have a task to perform,” Fossil said.

“I don’t recall—”

“It was predicated on whether Demascus split his sword, which was uncertain. Now he has accessed the dual-blade configuration, and you must do as Kalkan decreed. Are you ready?”

“What else do I have to fill my hours? Get a manicure at the salon? Have tea with the noble ladies of Airspur? Just tell me.”

Fossil studied her for a moment, perhaps wondering if the time had come to erase her after all. But then it said, “Go to House Norjah. Tell them where they can find the thief, Riltana, with her accomplice. Tell them the thief who stole one of two paintings missing from their gallery stands at the newly connected threshold of the Demonweb.”

CHAPTER TEN

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL

18 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

THE GATEKEEPER WAS GONE. A SWIRL OF SAND, BLACK ON black, was all that remained of the ebony golem. The windsoul and deva were alone in the courtyard, bleeding freely from dozens of slashes and ragged cuts. Riltana's consternation was mirrored on Demascus's face. He held two swords, twin to each other save for the color of their pulsing runes.

Chant waited until he was certain the sand wasn't about to swirl back into solidity. Then he broke cover. He motioned Jaul to follow. They walked into the courtyard of the structure, which looked like an internment house for the dead.

Demascus glanced at Chant. "What do you make of these?" he said, twirling the swords for effect.

"Gaffing blue!" said Jaul. The expression was new to Chant.

"Yeah, nice trick," Chant said. "How'd you break your sword and come out with two?"

Demascus shrugged. "Inspiration?"

"Accident, you mean," suggested Riltana.

The deva laughed. "The golem had two hearts. Well, not hearts, but as good as. I needed something that could pierce both at the same time. And—"

"And naturally, you split your sword," Chant finished.

Riltana said, "Surprised me as much as it did the golem."

"Caught me off guard, too, honestly," Demascus said. Then his brow furrowed. He peered at the sword with the white symbols.

"What?" said Chant.

“Each rune holds a specific stored enchantment. These blades hold the same runes as *Exorcessum* did. Except a couple I used earlier are still faded. Do you think they’re gone for good?”

“Sharkbite, how would I know?” asked Chant. Though he had to admit, he’d like to. The deva and his sword, scarf, charms, and other missing implements of his previous profession fascinated the pawnbroker. Demascus was a veritable trove of secrets, made all the more so by his missing memories.

“Go easy on the runes, then,” said Riltana. “Though if you’ve got any left for wounds, you and I both could use it.”

Demascus glanced at the webwork of blood dripping from his arms and frowned. “Now that you mention it, I do feel a little … unsteady.”

“Sit down!” said Chant. He waved at a stone block low enough to serve as a bench. “I have something the two of you can share. Riltana, didn’t you once tell me you were always going to carry a vial or two with you?”

The windsoul shrugged. “Yeah, well, I didn’t exactly get around to restocking. Not all of us take coin from that leech-fondler Master Raneger to sit on our butts all day.”

“Hey!” said Jaul. “Take that back! What’s wrong with Master Raneger?”

So ends Jaul’s imaginary romance, thought Chant. The pawnbroker was used to the thief’s vernacular, but he had to admit, her comment was a bit below the belt. He agreed with her assessment of Raneger, even if Jaul didn’t. She knew Chant was ashamed to be taking pay from the crime lord, and now she’d thrown it in his face.

But Chant swallowed a biting retort. Instead, he approached Demascus first with the glass vial from his belt pouch. He whispered, “Take a little more than half, why don’t you?”

“Thanks, Chant,” Demascus said. “Let’s sit awhile, then, before we push through into the portal. I don’t want to run

smack into Pashra and Chenraya until I've caught my breath."

Chant took a seat. He packed his pipe with some particularly noisome tabac he'd acquired a few weeks ago. Now, if he could just find a coal … where'd he put his pot? It was especially enchanted to keep a fire halflit for days without tending.

"We should see how it works," said Jaul.

The young man walked across the courtyard to the misted archway.

"Jaul, don't mess with that!" Chant said. He stuffed his pipe away and went to his son at the arch.

"Don't treat me like I'm an idiot, Pa," said Jaul, his voice quiet.

"Sorry. The Gatekeeper rattled me. And with Demascus and Riltana still hurt, I'm a little overexcited. I didn't meant to—"

Jaul waved his hands. "Whatever."

Chant felt the headway he'd been making with his son pull back like a retreating tide. "No, you're right, Jaul. Let's have a look at this and see if we can figure it out together."

The pawnbroker lifted a finger and began to trace the line of symbols decorating the arch. He knew a fair bit about secret alphabets….

"Do you know what it says?" said Jaul.

"Something about this portal leading to worlds other than our own," he lied, though he expected it was true enough, anyway.

"Gaffing," Jaul replied, his voice awed.

Chant nodded. "Exactly."

"How do we activate it?"

Sharkbite, Chant thought. How should I know? Probably just walk in … Except that this entrance could be part of a network, not a direct link to someplace else. Raneger had suggested such might be the case. If they just walked in,

who knew where they'd end up? They should try to figure out how to specify an endpoint.

He glanced back across the courtyard where Demascus and Riltana were trading friendly insults. "Hey, take a look at this, will you?" he called. "The arch seems straightforward enough. Jaul and I think we've got it under control, but we'd like a second …"

Something wasn't right. Gray mist carpeted the entrance tunnel, low and dark, spreading toward his friends. "Demascus!" Chant yelled.

The deva glanced up at Chant and Jaul, looking away from the fog. Chant frantically gesticulated and said, "Behind you!"

The deva glanced back to the courtyard entrance, just in time to see a figure resolve in the mist. A woman with red fingernails like daggers and colorless eyes with tiny voids instead of irises. The red-nailed woman leaped, smashing into him before the deva could get to his feet, and bore him to the sand-strewn floor. She clasped the deva's head in both hands and tried to bite his neck.

Behind her, dozens of humanoid shapes popped up like mushrooms after a rain. They charged into the courtyard, a flood of pale flesh. Their thrashing limbs blocked Chant's view of Demascus. From their throats issued jubilant howls.

Waukeen's empty purse, he thought. We're trapped! Unless …

"Jaul, through the portal!" he yelled. "Now!"

Chant's crossbow was in his hand. He didn't remember drawing it. He aimed at a black-skinned genasi with blood-colored *szuldar* looking his way. He fired. The single bolt became three, multiplied by the wizardry forged into his weapon. The wooden bolts struck home, and the vampire howled as it burned to ash.

A half-dozen vampires on the periphery turned to look at him and Jaul. His son, meanwhile, stood slack-jawed, too surprised to be properly afraid.

“Through the portal, Jaul!” Chant shouted again. “I’ll cover you.”

“We … we don’t know where it goes! It might—”

“Anywhere’s better than here. Don’t worry, I’m right behind you!”

He hip-checked his son. His girth against Jaul’s lean frame was no contest. The young man tumbled into the mist and was gone. Chant slapped another bolt into his hand crossbow, cranked it back with practiced speed, and fired another three-shot salvo at the advancing, leering vampires. Two went up with satisfying whooshes of flame. The other three paused, expressions of concern flitting over their features.

A voice, possibly female, bellowed, “Where are the paintings, thief? Norjah has sent me to collect them.”

Demascus was suddenly next to Chant, as if he’d been there all along but just edged out of an obscuring shadow. Several of the wounds closed by the healing elixir were laid raw and dripping again, with several new ragged red scrawls.

“Demascus, through the portal!” Chant said. He fired another bolt. This time he dusted three vampires, but only because they were so thickly clotted in the courtyard it would have been more remarkable had he missed.

Demascus took a deep breath and did not go through the portal. Of course not, the damn deva had a hero streak that ran a mile deep. Which was even more evident when he *wasn’t* channeling the residue of his former glory.

“There’s Riltana!” yelled Demascus, pointing with the tip of his red-runed sword.

The windsoul was running toward them from the far corner of the room, using the heads of the massed vampires like stepping-stones. It was so ridiculous that Chant half gasped, half laughed at the sight.

And then a black iron blade nearly skewered him, barely stopped by a parry from Demascus to a viperquick strike by

a vampire in a ragged leather jacket. With a whirl of swords too quick for Chant to follow, the deva disarmed the vampire with one sword and lopped off the creature's head with the other. Tar-colored blood spattered them both.

"Get her!" screamed the red-nailed leader of the horde. Fanged faces turned in confusion. Of the three or four dozen enraged vampires in the crush, only a few thought to look up. By then the windsoul was past, and more than a few got a heel to the face for their trouble. She reached the arch and dove through. Gone, just like Jaul.

"I hope this goes someplace," said Demascus, "and doesn't just disintegrate us, like that green devil face."

"Devil face? What—?" said Chant.

"I'll tell you later," said Damascus, as he fell rather than stepped into the mist.

"Great," muttered the pawnbroker, stepping through. Vapor, the hue of summertime blooms, swamped his vision.

When the mist cleared, Jaul, Demascus, and Riltana were waiting for him.

"Not disintegrated," said Demascus, and chuckled.

"Waukeen's empty purse!" Chant said. "As if we didn't have enough to worry about, and you go putting notions like that in my head."

"Well, it *was* a concern," said the deva. His mouth twitched on the edge of a grin.

"Where are we?" asked Jaul. The corridor in which they stood was built from the same stone blocks as the courtyard on the other side of the portal. Chant glanced behind him and was relieved to see a misted arch. He'd worried they'd entered someplace without an exit. The naked stone of the corridor stretched only a few tens of feet before it was overrun with a layer of thick gray spiderwebs. Chant couldn't tell if webs covered the corridor surfaces or actually

subsumed it—he suspected the latter. Instead of a square-cut corridor, the path forward was a spiraling woven tunnel.

“A passage only a drow could love,” said Demascus. “We might not be in the world any more, my friends. And if we step into that web tunnel … but I can’t be certain.”

“We should move,” said Riltana, glancing back at the arch. Blood slicked her scalp, and her eyes were tired. “If we can step through without any special key, the vampires will be able to do the same.” Demascus nodded.

“Excuse me, but no one mentioned vampires before,” said Chant. “Why are they chasing us? What paintings were they talking about? And how’d they know where to find us?”

Riltana looked at the floor. The woman vampire *had* said something about a thief. So it was the windsoul who had provoked them! He should have known.

“Something to talk about once we find someplace safer,” said Demascus. “Let’s move.”

They hustled down the corridor. Under Chant’s feet, the woven floor was only slightly adhesive—sticky enough to notice, but not so bad that it hindered movement. He wrinkled his nose as the air changed from bracing to acidic.

After a few hundred yards, the corridor opened into a large, vaulted chamber resembling a temple’s transept and nave, woven in webs. Gray columns lined the walls, and the distant ceiling arch was lit with a scattering of firefly gleams. Directly below the highest point on the ceiling stood a dais, easily ten feet high. A litter of bones was strewn over the top of the dais and spilled down the sides. Some of the bones were humanoid. And all were rough at the ends, as if the marrow had been gnawed and sucked from them.

“Stop,” said Demascus. As if he’d had to say anything, thought Chant. He really didn’t want to get any closer to the chewed leftovers of whatever butchery had occurred there …

“What’re those?” Jaul pointed to the walls, between the columns. The webbing was pocked with closed doors

intricately carved with spiders and geometric designs.

"Exits," said Demascus. "Each door leads to another place in the network, I suspect. Maybe places halfway across Faerûn. Or farther."

"Or deeper," said Chant. "Like subterranean cities of dark elves …"

"On the other hand," Demascus continued, "they could lead to an empty storeroom, or down another leg of webbed tunnel."

"Which one did the arambarium thieves go through?" said Riltana.

Demascus shook his head. "We should be able to pick up their track—it's fresh. And then choose someplace they *didn't* go, because I need to rest. I'm exhausted."

"There you go again!" said Riltana. "Always napping."

"Yeah," he replied. "Plus, you know my rule about fighting too many vampires before bedtime. That always makes me cranky." She laughed.

Chant said, "So, let me get this straight. The vampires have nothing to do with the drow?"

"No," said Demascus. "Well, they didn't before they tracked us into the Demonweb." He frowned. "Speaking of dark elves, we should check to see if I'm right about us being able to track them. Care to take a look?"

"Sure," said Chant. He bent and examined the ground. Demascus was correct—because the floor was slightly adhesive, any appreciable pressure applied to the floor shifted the threaded webs composing it. Once he got the hang of how a disturbed patch of web reacted, he figured it would be easy to track creatures through it. Although it seemed like the webs were naturally inclined to return to their original position over time.

Chant followed what might have been a trail to the dais and grabbed a femur bone. It was cool and smooth in his hands, but the rough part near the chewed end … Don't think about that, he told himself. He experimentally prodded

the floor with the jagged end of bone. Thousands of individual strands, maybe more, formed the ground. And each strand was probably made up of hundreds or thousands of even smaller threads. Could be why they weren't as sticky as they should be. But still enough to hold an impression!

Although … He bent closer. Were the webs moving on their own? Was that a … face?

"No!"

He jumped back and pointed at the floor. His stomach was making a serious effort to crawl into his throat. "The—this entire chamber—is haunted! I saw a man's face, screaming. Made out of webs."

"This place was created by drow," said Demascus, "It's probably woven as much from webs as from souls sacrificed to the dark elf goddess."

Chant swallowed.

"I didn't need to know that," Jaul said.

The pawnbroker empathized.

Just then, a howl tore into Chant's brain. Were the faces in the webs coming to life? His fingers suddenly went numb and dropped the bone as he stared at the webs.

"Vampires!" said Jaul. "They've come through the portal!"

Oh, right, the vampires. Chant cleared his throat. "Where to?"

"No time to choose," Demascus said. He jounced across the web floor, scattering human remains. He stopped before one of the side doors between the columns. Chant didn't have time to note the symbol carved on the door's face before Demascus shoved the door open.

"Everyone inside," the deva whispered. No one argued.

Chant found himself in a room with a hard floor, not a web, thank Waukeen's stingy mercies! The air was musty, like a damp basement that had suffered several floods. The sunrod's light had noticeably dimmed, as if it was working

twice as hard to shed even half the amount of light it was normally able to …

Demascus slammed the door on the webbed corridors. The moment it closed, the door melted into the wall and was gone. Or maybe disappeared into the inky shadows.

“Where are we?” said Jaul.

“Shh,” said Demascus. The deva laid his head against the wall to listen where the door had been. Why was it so dark? Chant stepped closer to one wall, and was barely able to tell that it was painted a dreary gray and decorated with chipped and peeling wainscoting. Two exits were visible.

“I feel like I’ve gone blind,” murmured Jaul. He rubbed at his eyes. Chant felt the same—it was almost as if a grainy film covered everything.

Demascus flashed the kid a look, then motioned to Chant. The pawnbroker brought the rod closer. He saw the door hadn’t exactly disappeared, though it had suffered some kind of transformation. A line drawing defaced the wall and wainscoting, penned by a quill dipped in charcoal ink, and traced a square only half as large as the opening they’d come through. The line wasn’t even particularly neat or straight—it looked like it had been scrawled by a determined though not particularly talented child.

“Can we get back through?” he whispered to Demascus.

“Hope so. Now’s not the time to test it. We wouldn’t want to step through into our pursuer’s laps. I can hear their screams on the other side, faintly. They sound angry.” Chant shuddered.

“I don’t think we’re in Faerûn anymore; the light falls differently,” said Demascus. “So we shouldn’t stray too far from this entrance. Who knows what kind of place this is? On the other hand, if our pursuers look through from the other side, I’d rather they not immediately see us camped here.”

The deva approached one paneled door hanging ajar on the opposite wall. Chant followed, holding the sunrod at head height in one hand and his crossbow in the other.

The room beyond contained torn and rotting divans. Deep claw marks scored the hardwood furniture. Two walls were wainscoted and held a door apiece, but the longest wall was a mortared, slightly curved expanse of stone. Snuffed candles littered the floor near a fallen candelabra. Faint sparks glittered through a single narrow aperture in the curved wall.

“Arrow slit?” Chant said, pointing. When Demascus shrugged, he advanced and looked through the vertical opening. It was night. And—

“We’re in a tower!” he said. They were in one of several turreted fingers rising from a labyrinthine castle that sprawled across the slope of a mountain range. Only a handful of stars burned red in the night sky, barely bright enough to illuminate the tallest mountain peaks. His breath steamed as it escaped out the gap. Out on the battlements, *things* fluttered just at the edge of perception, whispering and creeping, waiting to pounce on anyone foolish enough to go out into that endless night …

“We’re in some kind of old fortress,” he announced, his voice hoarse. “One larger than I’ve ever heard tell of. And it looks … haunted.” The others crowded around to see. Chant stepped away and closed his eyes. Seeing those unfamiliar stars … it viscerally shook him in a way that the deva’s declaration, that they had left behind the world he knew, had not.

He looked down at the golden yellow light of the sunrod and drank it in for solace. He needed it. Fear had taken root. Fear for his son and, indeed, for himself. A pack of vampires had chased them into a web of portals and from there into the first side-exit they’d found, which resembled a deformed echo of the real world—a practice model that’d been tossed aside but not completely destroyed by the lords of creation. A failed attempt that lingered in some forgotten corner of existence, attracting ghosts, vengeful vampires, and foolish

creatures like Chant Morven, who should have stayed home selling pawned silver.

Chant wondered if he'd ever see sunlight again. Waukeen, you have much to answer for. Then he forced a smile for his son and put strength into his voice for Demascus and Riltana. "Let's try one of these rooms away from the window, what say? I don't like the cold air it's letting in."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Somewhere in the Demonweb

18 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

"Rat-snuggler!" hissed Riltana when the door slammed behind her

She spun, all but snuffing the light of the candle she held in one hand. Shadows jumped to malevolent life across the low ceiling. The candle flame stuttered ... then shivered back from the brink of extinction. Claw-like shadows shrank back to the corners, where they lurked like vultures. "Fist this," she muttered, gazing around the room she'd just entered. The wall to her left curved with the outer shell of the tower. It was fitted with leaded glass windows in iron latticework. Rotting chairs and couches were scattered around a bookcase. Two more doors lay on the opposite side of the room.

Why did I volunteer to scout ahead? she thought. Damn Demascus and his stupid ideas! I'm nearly as worn out as he is—we should have sent that kid to look for a place to hunker down! She knew she wasn't being fair. If vampires came through the portal into this shadowed castlescape, it made sense to leave Demascus on the threshold to hold them back. Which meant sending either her to spy out a few rooms or Chant, who refused to leave Jaul's side. And Jaul was clearly *not* the one to send sneaking through these abandoned chambers. She'd seen the sense of it. She'd patted Chant and grinned her I-don't-give-a-crap grin at Demascus, and set off.

That was then. This is *now*, she thought. Jaul should have been the one to go. It would be good for the kid. Give him something to think about other than trying to impress her

and snub his father. The silence stretched. Riltana convinced herself a draft had slammed the door, not a stalking ghost. She squinted at a bookcase. But the still-guttering candle's light was too dim for her to make out its contents. She stepped closer and saw that only a few moldering tomes remained on the shelves, but with the way the light from her candle jumped around, it was difficult to see just how many …

Damn. Why the fist had she thought it would be a good idea to save her sunrod for later and use a candle instead? What a terrible light source. It would probably get her killed when some ghoul crept up behind her using her inadequate light as a cloak, and …

"Riltana," she chided herself, but only after she looked over her shoulder. No ghoul. Another step closer to the shelves and she saw that just two books retained covers. One had an obsidian-black binding and no obvious title. She set the candle down and flipped through the ragged, blank pages until she reached the very last one, which seemed like a title: *Tales of Unbecoming*. She had a sudden bad feeling about the book, and replaced it on the shelf.

The other book was halfsize, and decorated with a greenish teardrop-like design beneath the title, *Final Journal of Delirium: A Book of Poisons*, by Tora Kotryl. This one has possibilities, she thought. Instead of dropping it back on the shelf, Riltana closed her hand, folding the book away in the secret space of her gloves. Now I can add "books" to my list of larcenies …

You're wasting time, she thought. Remember why you're here? Not to loot abandoned keeps or play hide and hunt with vampires—it's to find the louts mucking with Akanûl's arambarium supply. Only then will Queen Arathane intercede and send her letter to Carmenere. And then, after Carmenere forgives you, you'll live merrily ever after. Right. Part of her wondered if she should still believe this dream. Would things really go that smoothly?

Riltana blocked that avenue of thought. With a frown, Riltana approached the two doors on the room's periphery. The first door opened onto some kind of wizard's laboratory. Its central feature was a black cauldron filled with a dried mass of something she didn't want to look at too closely. Benches were heaped with all manner of jars, vials, and slender glassware. Niches were cut into the curved stone side wall. She edged into the chamber far enough to see an urn in each hollow, and on each urn was a name. She shivered and backed out of the room.

Behind the other door was a bedroom. Three beds with tattered sheets were crowded against a wardrobe and a bureau scattered with combs, pins, and a layer of dust years thick. A barred window over the beds looked out into the lonely night. This was it—the place to rest, despite being next door to the wall of urns. It had a secure window, a heavy door to hold against attackers, and better yet, beds.

She retraced her route through the dark corridors, ignoring what sounded like distant screaming down one hall, and found the closet-like chamber where the others waited.

Demascus looked dead on his feet. Seeing him reminded her of how tired she was. A rest was more than overdue.

"Let's go," she said. "I've found a place we can hole up for a while."

No one spoke as she led them back to the bedchamber, though Jaul moaned slightly when they passed the screaming hallway. Chant shoved the wardrobe in front of the door to barricade it. Demascus didn't argue when she suggested he take one bed. She took another and let Chant and Jaul thumb wrestle over who'd get the third.

The next thing she knew, she was opening her eyes. She'd been dreaming about eating frozen milk-honey and flying over the jubilant lights of Airspur on a spring evening …

Chant's sunrod was spent, and her candle had burned down, though someone had lit another. Its tentative flame sketched the shape of Chant huddled on the third bed. Jaul

lay on the floor with a ratty black blanket covering him. Demascus was sitting up rubbing his temples.

“Can’t sleep?” he whispered.

She shrugged. “Actually, I was out like a snuffed lantern. How much time has passed?”

“Hours. Probably five or six.”

“Feel any better?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I won’t be juggling earthmotes any time soon, like I normally do. But I could probably do apples, or maybe even axes. How about you?”

The image of Demascus juggling axes made her smile. She stretched. “Better.”

“Good. So … Riltana?”

“Yeah?”

“Something’s bothering me, and I’m hoping you can help me out.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Have you been entirely truthful about the vampires?”

Oh shit, she thought. He knows! “Truthful?” she said.

“Yeah, you know, when you explained what happened at House Norjah.”

A bouquet of denials rose to her lips. But they didn’t smell sweet. She sighed. “I didn’t lie, Demascus. But I may not have told you absolutely everything.”

“It appears we’ve got a little time on our hands. Maybe if I knew everything, I could make better decisions.”

She nodded. She glanced over at Chant and Jaul. Both were still sleeping. There’d be no help or distraction from them. “All right. It went down like I told you. I got a lead that Cyndra’s painting was in Norjah’s gallery. I snuck in, didn’t find the painting I was looking for, and disturbed a bunch of vampires. They followed me to your place.”

“But?” he prompted.

“But … while they didn’t have the painting I wanted, the gallery certainly contained some interesting artwork.”

“Riltana, did you—”

“There were portraits—about ten, maybe twelve. All disturbing. One was a hooded man with no eyes, another was a soldier missing a hand, a wizard with no mouth … one was really awful, like a person sewed together with dead body parts …” The hair on the back of her neck prickled as she recalled the images on display in that room.

“Disturbing how?”

“It was like all the paintings were alive.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were talking to each other, well, whispering.”

Demascus shook his head slightly as if to make room for the concept of speaking paintings in his mind.

“What were they saying?” he said.

“I couldn’t make it out, not with all of them talking at once. So, I …”

“Took one,” he finished.

Riltana sighed. She got out of her bed and faced Demascus. She traced a rectangle shape in the air. From glovespace, the painting emerged and became a real weight in her grip. She set it against the wall. The painting was of a figure in a dark cloak and mask that nearly blended into the brick backdrop of the composition. The figure carried a satchel stuffed with gold coins that overflowed from the top.

“Some kind of thief?” said Demascus.

“That’s its name,” she said. “The Thief. It told me. It knows amazing stuff—all about burglary, hiding, getting in and out of secure places—”

“And you stole it,” said Demascus. “Some kind of wizardly artifact, brimming with useful knowledge anyone would value. No wonder House Norjah has sent a hit squad of vampires after you!”

“Yeah.” The eyes behind the painted mask caught Riltana’s. The portrait volunteered in a papery thin voice, “Acquisition of keys is not nearly as important as acquisition of trust. To break into a place of commerce, all that’s required is—”

“Hush, you,” whispered Riltana. She snatched up the painting and folded it away. What did it think of the glovespace, there with her extra rope, sunrod, the Prisoner’s Stone, arambarium chest, book of poisons, and other useful bits?

Demascus scratched his chin. “I don’t want to be the one to tell you your business, Riltana, but … maybe you should give the painting back. Norjah knows who you are, they know who I am, and they’re vampires, or have vampires on call. I doubt they’re going to rest until they kill us. Maybe if we return what you took to the head of the house, we can end this.”

Shame heated her cheeks. Demascus was right. Why was she so damn reckless? Yes, she should return it. She had actually already considered it. But she wanted to pump the arcane artifact for a few tidbits first. She wanted to learn the trick for picking a particular lock mechanism that’d always eluded her, maybe find a recipe for eyeblack that actually worked, and perhaps even the rudiments of breaking encrypted messages …

“Piss,” she whispered loudly. “I wish I’d never heard of House Norjah! If I ever see that bitch who told me Cyndra’s painting was there, she’ll meet the business end of my boot.”

Chant snorted, and Jaul rolled over. Demascus chuckled quietly, one finger up to his lips. “I almost feel sorry for her already. What was her game, I wonder?”

“Who knows? I never met her before. Though she seemed to know me. She was tall and had eyes like the cloudy orbs of a stormsoul. Very striking on a human.”

Demascus blinked. “Wait, what? Your informant was … a tall woman with eyes like storm clouds? Dark hair?”

She nodded. The deva’s mouth was working, as if trying to formulate a sentence after being clubbed in the face.

“Yeah … Hey, are you all right?” she said.

Demascus staggered out of the bed. “Did she have skin like coffee?”

Riltana nodded slowly. “Yes. You know her?”

“It sounds like the … the woman I … the woman a previous incarnation of me killed, the one I told you about. Madri. I saw her when I first reclaimed *Exorcessum*, and a couple of times since. I assumed it was only a memory so strong I hallucinated her presence. But … lords of light. Has she actually returned?”

“Uh …”

“How could she? She’s human, not bound to the world like me. Unless she’s a spirit … a spirit of vengeance …”

“Wait, you’re saying the woman who told me about Cyndra’s painting is, what? A ghost come to … to have her revenge? Then why’d she approach *me* with a false lead?”

Demascus shook his head in confusion. His usual halfsmile was gone, replaced by a grim frown. “Maybe it’s a coincidence.”

“I … No. My past is still stalking me. The mistakes, the enemies, and the angry ghosts of those I’ve wronged. And of all those I’ve forgotten.”

“If it *is* her,” said Riltana,” then she knows a lot about you and your friends. She knew about my oath to get Cyndra’s painting back.”

Demascus looked glum.

“If you were lovers once, she probably still has a soft spot for you. Maybe next time you see her, you should—”

“What, apologize for killing her?”

“For starters,” Riltana said. “And ask her to explain a few things. Maybe you don’t have to find your missing Whorl of Ioun to learn more about your past. Maybe you just need to find, um, what’s her name?”

“Madri.”

“Find Madri—shouldn’t be too hard. She’s apparently watching you. And me.”

Riltana shivered. She didn’t like the idea of a vengeful ghost from Demascus’s past stalking her, manipulating her. All the more reason the goat-humping deva needed to mend fences with Madri, whatever she was. After that, Riltana had a few questions for the woman herself. Such as, why’d she send Riltana into House Norjah in the first place? Had she wanted the thief to stir up the vampires? It didn’t make any sense. Not to mention how the repercussions of her theft were getting in the way of their main objective.

“Riltana,” Demascus finally said, “I don’t think you understand the magnitude of what you’re suggesting. I mean—I killed a person in cold blood, a person who trusted me! She’s not going to just forgive and forget.”

A scream like a cat being flayed burst into the bedchamber.

Chant and Jaul both started awake.

“What was that?” said Jaul.

“The vampires,” Chant said, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “They’ve found us.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

ITHIMIR ISLE

19 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

LIGHTNING SIZZLED JUST OVER CHENRAYA'S HEAD. THE flash nearly blinded her, and she dropped to the ground as her passive-defensive spells channeled away most of the lightning's charge into so many chasing sparks. But something still got through; it felt like a giant kicked her in the chest.

She squinted up against the flickering, smoke-obscured ceiling of the massive cavern. Lord Pashra stood over her, yelling something and brandishing his cleaver at the genasi soldiers and war wizards who'd engaged them.

Chenraya had thought crushing the final knot of defenders would be easy. Of course the oni had told her otherwise, that the remaining defenders were strongest and would prove *blah, blah, blah* … She'd ignored him. Genasi were no more special than any other slave race, she'd said. They'd succumb to Lolth's will. So she'd selected only herself, Pashra, and an exploratory force of arachnids to deal with the problem.

Lying in the rubble while gasping in pain from the last genasi stroke was bad. But being proved wrong by the oni was far worse. It was a slight that couldn't be forgiven.

However, given that her exploratory force had been turned into smoking carcasses, she now had other priorities. Beginning with the fact that she could barely feel her extremities. The defending war wizard's lightning bolt had been even more potent than she'd realized.

Pashra dragged her by her cloak behind one of her fallen arachnid behemoths. She was too surprised by his

impudence to resist.

“Are you hurt?” he yelled. His voice was oddly muted, as if her head was covered in a layer of webs.

She shook her head, and her ears began to ring.

The final genasi defenders were barricaded against the mine face that contained the mother lode. The genasi couldn’t retreat—they could only fight. And fight they did, with the strength and cunning of those with no other options.

She, the oni, and her force had dashed against them and broken like waves on the shore. Which hardly seemed fair, given how easily everything else had gone. Genasi on the surface hadn’t expected claim jumpers, probably because an attack had never happened before. The upper island defenses had fallen immediately a few tendays ago. Since then, she and Pashra had surreptitiously moved several shipments of arambarium back through Airspur and, from there, into the Demonweb for final transfer to Menzoberranzan.

But the defenders down here had held out that entire time, despite being bottled up and unable to call for help. Their numbers were depleted, but they held fast. They knew the moment Chenraya broke them, the mother lode would be lost. They were well-trained, loyal subjects of the Throne of Akanûl.

That was about to change; soon, they’d just be corpses.

“Lolth, hear your daughter’s prayer,” she whispered. “Lend me your grace, as I accomplish your will. Blood will be spilled and souls reaped for your glory.” New strength flowed into her as she spoke. The ringing in her ears subsided, the pain in her chest faded, and feeling returned to her fingers and toes.

Chenraya rose and stood next to Pashra. “If you can fight, show me. We don’t have time for this conflict.”

The oni growled, swinging two vicious tusks her way. Would he actually be stupid enough to attack her?

No. Instead, he drew a glamour over himself. A moment later, a genasi male stood where Pashra had been. He was dressed in a close approximation to the uniforms worn by the mine defenders—the armor and sash of an Akanûl elite peacemaker.

The genasi said in Pashra's voice, "I'll create a distraction on their flank, Chenraya. I trust you'll take advantage."

Then he faded into invisibility.

The drow priestess was reluctantly impressed. The ogre magician had his uses. If he could deliver on his promise to distract the defenders, maybe she wouldn't sacrifice him. At least, not immediately.

Chenraya considered using her most potent charm, or calling on her most powerful prayer. The charm was shaped like a yochlol, a demon servitor of Lolth. The prayer, when spoken, would literally dissolve and disintegrate the flesh of friends and foes alike … but she had only one yochlol bead, and the vile prayer was too potent for her to use more than a few times. Better to hold onto those trump cards until nothing else would serve. Instead she settled on something less catastrophic and invoked a prayer of flame.

A pillar of purple fire crashed down from the ceiling as if it'd bored straight through all the rock between the sky and this buried cavern. She'd called it down on the heads of the defenders, but they'd somehow managed to deflect it to one side. But a few still got caught in the flames and died screaming.

The rest returned fire. Arrows, quarrels, and a few screaming bolts of magic arced toward her. She ducked back down behind the arachnid carcass and waited for Pashra's distraction.

She didn't have to wait long. A new scream of outrage and pain echoed across the cavern. Chenraya leaped from cover and dashed forward as the defenders behind the barricades contracted in violent confusion.

The floor of the cavern was strewn with open cavities, forming a crude checkerboard of pits. Chenraya thudded across a plank that bridged a rough-sided mine scar. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw a shape move in the darkness below. She glanced down and caught the faintly illuminated shape of a drake-like figure made of stone rising beneath her. She leaped to one side as it burst up from the pit and tried to bite her head off. Failing, it still struck her hard enough that instead of falling into the pit, she tumbled to a halt several feet past its lip. Face down in the dirt for the second time in almost as many heartbeats.

Her attacker was a stone elemental in the shape of a minor dragon, glimmering with arambarium stains. A genasi defender rode on its back, controlling it. Unlike the obsidian entity she'd subverted beneath Airspur, this one was already fully activated—and she was its target.

A stone claw descended on her but she rolled to one side, then back the other way as the other claw raked at her. The genasi rider, an earthsoul, of course, was crowing in victory.

Chenraya broke the yochlol charm's leather thong with a jerk and threw the yellowish item one way as she scrambled the other.

A flash of mustard-colored light bloomed. Chenraya kept rolling until she was several feet from the drake, which suddenly had more immediate problems to deal with than her.

Then she was up again, her heels to another pit, readying another prayer of purple fire.

Consternation was visible in the earthsoul rider's face as his elemental faced down a creature of Abyssal phlegm, with spastic tentacles and roving eyes in an amorphous yellow body. It was the yochlol she'd summoned, a gift from Lolth sent to protect her.

The yochlol spoke, its voice a shockingly seductive contralto, more beautiful than any normal drow woman's.

“The Spider Queen watches you, Chenraya. You’re so pretty. I wish I could stay. I’d dearly love to get to know you better.”

“I … I am honored, handmaiden,” Chenraya replied.

“Of course you are, little one.” The yochlol laughed. Unlike its speaking voice, the demon’s mirth was nightmarish. Chenraya avoided cringing by clenching her teeth as hard as she could.

Then the stone drake pounced on the yochlol. The yellow body splattered beneath the granite bulk like a popped fruit. Strands of yellow ichor spewed up as tentacles and coiled around the drake.

The elemental beast shuddered as the yochlol’s arms tightened. The earthsoul leaped clear, even as drake and yochlol glimmered like a heat mirage.

The yochlol said, “You and I will meet again, Chenraya Xorlorrin. You’ve incurred a debt.” Then demon and elemental seemed to flatten, losing dimension, until the intertwined image folded away and was gone. Lolth’s handmaiden had returned to the Abyss and brought an elemental drake morsel back with it.

Chenraya wasted a moment wondering if the demon handmaiden had lied. Or had some kind of debt really been incurred? That was the problem dealing with demons—one moment they followed instructions as they should, but the next, they were feasting on your entrails. Demons just didn’t follow rules of any sort. Just like their mistress, Lolth herself …

The priestess clamped off that potentially blasphemous line of thought. Instead she focused on the brown-hued genasi thrown from his stone saddle. He was already casting some kind of spell. Which meant he was one of the war wizard defenders. A geomancer, probably, summoning another rocky beast to inflict on her.

But he was cut off from the rest of the genasi, who by the sound of it were having trouble dealing with the disguised oni’s “treachery.”

Chenraya pointed at the geomancer and loosed a venom bolt. The ray caught the man full in the face. He gagged, shook with palsy as the poison coursed through his blood, but tried to finish his spell nonetheless. It was a close call. She readied herself.

However, the genasi slumped to the cavern floor, blackened and shriveled, before he could choke out the final phrase.

She murmured a prayer for his soul. If she was lucky, she'd just consigned his spirit to Lolth's tender mercies instead of wherever it should normally have gone. The little things were what sometimes made life worth living.

The priestess turned her attention back to the genasi barricade. None of the defenders were paying attention to her. They'd all hunkered down, watching each other with wary eyes, wondering which one among them had suddenly gone crazy and started killing his compatriots.

Chenraya decided to take advantage of the confusion and risk drawing attention to herself. She whispered a short prayer of amplification. Then she bellowed at the top of her lungs, "Descend, my army—join me, my harem! Find me, slothful mercenaries of Bregan D'aerthe! Why've you left your mistress alone so long?"

Her voice bounced back and forth across the great chamber, blasted down the side tunnels, and rose like an explosive plume up the access shafts to the surface. The defenders clamped hands over their ears to block out the fury of the sound.

In truth, the mercenaries *should* have already joined her, without her having to summon them. Surely the fact that she, Pashra, and the exploratory force of arachnids hadn't returned after more than an hour should've drawn her supposed allies to make certain all was well. Perhaps the genasi were not the only ones dealing with treachery …

A flash of violet light presaged the appearance of the Bregan D'aerthe laggards. A handful of dark elf silhouettes

with drawn swords and wands engaged the defenders before the genasi realized the equation had changed.

With Pashra already behind the enemy barricade, she and the mercenaries made quick work of the last stubborn stragglers over the course of ten heartbeats filled with screams and blood.

At last, the mine was completely under her control. All its tunnels, its hollow pits, and its mineral resources were hers to do with as she wished.

For starters, she'd fortify the vast cavern so that, unlike the genasi before her, she wouldn't lose control of the mother lode. She studied the ceiling and nodded. If anyone came from Akanûl to reclaim their arambarium, she'd bring the entire island down on his or her head.

"Can you feel it?" came Pashra's voice, uncharacteristically hushed with awe.

Chenraya turned round to see the oni pointing at the blank cavern wall. But she knew the blankness was just a facade. Standing so close, it was impossible to ignore the way her hair stood on end and her skin prickled. Something truly ancient lay trapped behind the stone. Something powerful beyond accounting.

The arambarium mother lode. Or, as Pashra claimed, a relic carved from a dead primordial of sundered Abeir that had fallen to Faerûn like a dead star.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Somewhere in the Demonweb

19 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

The wonderful thing about a circular floor plan, thought Demascus, was that if you went around long enough, sooner or later you circle around back to where you started. As long as your pursuers didn't immediately realize the same thing. They might have split their number, sending one group down the scent trail and another down the counterclockwise path. That would be bad. Demascus shrugged. The situation couldn't be helped. They could only go forward.

The chamber ahead was a clutter of wizardly paraphernalia, ominous in its dusty immobility. "Be careful," he whispered. "Don't knock anything over. But go quick." He adjusted his twin swords sheathed through his belt on either hip. Hopefully their ends wouldn't swing into anything as he passed. Vampiric victory screams shivered the air. The Norjah pursuers had found their odor. Now we race.

"Go!" he said, still whispering.

Riltana lunged for the far door, beneath the grim wall of urns. Chant pushed Jaul ahead of him. Demascus wasted a moment to quietly close the door they'd entered through, casting about in his mind for some method of obscuring their passage or obliterating their scent. He came up with nothing. His memory was doing its best blank-slate impression. Useful skills from previous incarnations only flowed when he worked himself up into an echo of the Sword of the Gods. He frowned. He'd rather avoid doing that unless absolutely necessary—he didn't trust himself. That version of himself. When he was the Sword, his joy was at its zenith. Existence was too fluidly wonderful, where everything and

anything seemed possible. Even doing something wildly at odds with common sense and his own goals. Right now, he had to focus on getting everyone to safety. Then, maybe, he'd unleash the Sword on the vampires …

He skirted a black cauldron that smelled of feet and rotten earthworms. He steadied a clay jar Jaul accidentally set wobbling as he passed. The moment Demascus touched it he realized it was a funerary urn. The name inscribed on it read, "Kurwen, Master of Dark Spells."

He snatched his hand back. The last thing they needed was to sensitize yet another necrotic threat to their presence. He took it as given that the ashes of dead "Dark Spell" wizards should remain undisturbed.

The next chamber was another decomposing sitting room, vampire free and empty of any other obvious threat. Riltana was already across it and easing open the far door. Demascus winced when Jaul stumbled over a chair, which produced a scratchy squeal as it slid three feet across the dusty floor.

They all stopped, faces taut.

"Just go!" said Demascus.

Riltana ducked into the exit closest to the curved wall. Demascus followed, and they entered cramped quarters overflowing with junk. They carefully picked their way through a morass of tapestries, rugs, and heaped rags that smothered a collection of broken swords—It didn't matter what the contents were. Nothing jumped them. The next two shadow-swathed chambers proved equally nerve-wracking on entry, but ultimately unthreatening.

Finally, they burst into the room where they'd first entered the castle. The scribbled door marker was swallowed once again by an open portal that looked out into a corridor composed of spider silk. The woman with scarlet nails stood smack in the middle of the opening, blocking their exit and using the point of her black iron sword as a hinge-stop in the door to prevent it from closing. She cracked a fanged smile

at him. By all that was holy and sovereign, he thought, I really *really* hate vampires.

“What an interesting set of paths you’ve discovered. An entrance to the fabled Demonweb! House Norjah will thank you for showing them the way. Ordinarily, they might even pay you a finder’s fee.”

“Listen,” said Demascus. “We’ll give the painting back. It was a mistake.”

“You mean paintings, plural,” said the vampire.

“No, we took … I mean, Riltana took just one.”

“Two of the Whispering Children from the collection went missing the night we chased this one,” the vampire pointed at the windsoul.

He shot the thief a look of surprise. She’d stolen two?

“I only took *one*!” insisted Riltana.

The woman’s predatory smile widened. “Liar. You know what happens to liars, my dear?”

“They get pudding?” said Riltana.

The vampire screamed, “Return to me, hunters! They’re here!” The vampire pulled her sword from the hinge. The door slammed in their faces.

A bolt from Chant’s crossbow thudded into the frame a bare instant before the door closed on it, preventing it from shutting completely and trapping them in the dark tower with the vampires. Demascus’s shoulder hit the door a moment later. He smashed through the opening, back out into the Demonweb. The swinging door knocked the red-nailed woman backward, giving Demascus time to draw his weapons. Vampire screams funneled through the opening behind him. The hordes had heard their mistress and were hurtling back from wherever they were in the darkling dimension.

“Chant, Jaul, Riltana, get out of here!” he yelled. He deflected a slanting neck slash from the vampire’s black iron blade with an outward sweep of his white sword. He followed up with a backhand slash of his red-runed sword to her neck.

The vampire easily clanged her blade into his while simultaneously shifting to his left. Her blade came down again, this time toward his extended arm. He flinched more than retracted his arm, and her attack only managed to cut a thin line through his armor instead of lopping off a limb. She was moving too fast! Faster than a human or genasi or any mortal creature could. Maybe even as fast as him, when he was able to summon the ghost of his office. He reached for that feeling of sublime jubilation—

Her front kick was like a shot from a ballista fired from the vampire's hip. When it connected with his stomach, he staggered and dropped one sword. The vampire howled with hungry anticipation, but then Riltana and Chant were between her and the deva. Riltana's short sword flashed. Chant fired what appeared to be a continuous volley of quarrels. And the woman snarled as she dissolved in a frenzy of a hundred black wings. She re-formed several yards into the temple, glaring with burning eyes. Jaul scurried out of the portal, a cacophony of predatory calls breaking on him like waves. He yanked his father's quarrel from the frame and slammed the door. The pursuing screams instantly ceased.

"Way to go!" Demascus told Jaul. The hunting horde caught on the other side would find it difficult to open a portal reduced to a childish scrawl on wall and wainscoting. The deva retrieved his dropped sword. The vampire's shockingly strong kick had winded him, but that didn't matter. The scales were balanced again. Without her horde, she could be beaten. He'd beat her before, in his own house, with just Riltana to help him.

"Give up!" he told her. The red-nailed woman hadn't moved. Demascus imagined he detected concern lining her brow. But she wasn't stupid; she must realize that without her army of minion bloodsuckers, she was unlikely to beat the four of them fresh from rest.

“What?” said Jaul. “You’re going to let her survive? We should take her down. She’s all alone!” The young man brandished one of his scarlet knives, making slashing motions in the air.

The woman said, “Come try me, child,” and stared across the intervening space at Chant’s son with naked appetite.

Jaul blanched, then looked at Demascus, as if the deva would side with him. Demascus suppressed a sigh. If Jaul didn’t learn to temper his emotions, he’d not live to see his twentieth year.

“No,” said Demascus. “I’d prefer House Norjah as an ally, not a foe. This is not our fight. And I want to see what Norjah knows about a friend of mine who lured Riltana there …”

“But—”

“Jaul, stow your sails. It’s up to this harpy whether she wants to survive or make a deal with us.” The windsoul swung around to regard their foe across the room.

The vampire’s snarl gradually smoothed away. “You think you could stop me from leaving if I wished? I can become smoke, or mist, or a flock of bats.” Though she no longer displayed her teeth, her eyes still flashed death.

“Maybe you could,” said Demascus. “But listen. You’ve been hunting down this painting for a while. If you flee now, you’ll have failed for a second time. You have a chance to come away from this with some measure of success—we’ll give back the painting we have, if you intercede for us with your house.”

The woman sneered. “I don’t make decisions for House Norjah. Lord Kasdrian does … for now. And he is unlikely to deal fairly with those who’ve thieved from him. But …” The woman rubbed her chin. “Perhaps I *could* put in a good word for you. He’s oath-bound to listen to me. I am Lady Ascension, of the Rune Court.”

“Rune Court?” said Chant. “What’s that? Wait, is that something to do with the Twisted Rune?”

Demascus had never heard of either. But he didn't much care what they were, unless they could sway Kasdrian. The vampire gave the pawnbroker only a leering smile in answer. He shoved his swords into his belt. "Very well, Lady Ascension, let's …"

A sound he realized he'd been hearing for a little while finally vaulted into his consciousness. A sort of low, thrumming noise. "Anyone hear that?" he said.

Lady Ascension glanced at the tunnel floor.

"I do. The webs are vibrating. The Demonweb has noticed we are not drow …"

Everyone looked down. The interweaving fibers in the passage were moving! Distorting, sliding, and swelling, as if many things were pushing through the layers into the tunnel.

"Retreat!" she yelled. "To the entrance." Jaul needed no prompting—he'd started moving while everyone else looked down. Chant and Riltana jumped, but wasted no breath asking for explanations. Demascus followed, glancing over his shoulder.

Lady Ascension thrashed in place, as if caught in a spider web. The flooring around her feet bubbled up, disgorging hundreds of many legged ebony spiders that swarmed the vampire to her waist. Ascension's form pulsed between pale skin and formless smoke. Each time her body lost definition, it was hauled back to solidity by some unseen force. A force, Demascus suddenly recognized at the core of his being, which was divine. It was the unconscious regard of Lolth herself, reacting to a transgression in her world web!

Lady Ascension was lost. As they soon would be, too.

The deva didn't cry warning to the others already sprinting to the portal. Yelling would only draw attention and guarantee their doom. They were farther ahead and might make it to the exit, because they hadn't been delayed by watching a vampire be destroyed with poisonous spiders. It was *he* who was most in danger of being caught next by the

arachnid tide. The sourceless light of the Demonweb offered no shadows to accelerate through, bypassing the space in between. It was all down to a final sprint. But the sticky flooring grasped at him more implacably with every step. The woven mouth of the tunnel itself was constricting like a throat trying to swallow down a pesky bit of supper.

Then web walls split open on either side, disgorging a fresh flood of eight-limbed horror.

He sprinted through it. A forest of lofting web strands glittered in the corners of his eye. Lords of light! Ignore the contracting tunnel. Forget the spiders. Just go. You're a stone cast from a catapult, tearing through sheet after sheet of gauzy sails, to finally crash through—

Demascus shot out of the orange haze of the exit portal into a dim courtyard filled with dusty debris. A discontinuity he hadn't noticed on entering the Demonweb momentarily staggered his footing. Instead of skidding to a graceful stop, his toes caught on a piece of flooring jutting through the dust. He fell on his face. His palms and cheek stung with abrasion from the slide. His legs quivered with dull exhaustion. But no webs had caught him, nor had he been bitten. Lying face down on the floor with just some scrapes and aches, he counted himself lucky beyond words. He turned his head to the side and saw a familiar pair of boots.

Riltana's cheerful voice said, "See, Chant? I don't make this stuff up. Can you imagine a *worse* time for some shuteye?"

House Norjah was rooted in Airspur's steep, south-facing cliffs. It enjoyed an unobstructed view of the Throne of Majesty and, beyond that, the northern cliff line. The structure's noble veneer gave nothing away; Demascus doubted the neighbors suspected the place hosted a nest of vampires. A nest somewhat depleted, of course; he

wondered what portion of Norjah's strength was represented by the horde trapped in the shadow tower dimension?

Demascus tugged the bell pull, a chain ending in a brass wolf-head sculpture. A sound distinctly unlike a bell thudded through the structure of the manor. The storm had lessened its fury, but rain still drizzled down from the sky. If they were forced to flee back outside, would the clouds give vampire pursuers enough shade to hunt their quarry without fear of burning up?

"We can still turn around and leave, you know," said Riltana, eyeing the closed door. "The storm's almost spent. With the Demonweb roused against intruders, we can't follow the drow and oni to their destination; shouldn't we head out to the island where Queen Arathane told us to go? I mean, really, this is just a sideline—"

"A sideline trying to kill us!" said Chant.

"Not trying to kill *you*, idiot," she snapped. "Me. And, well, probably Demascus now, too …"

"Exactly," said Demascus. "This situation needs to be dealt with. I don't want to be ambushed again while I'm investigating a secret drow incursion of Akanûl." And, he didn't say, find out how Madri is mixed up with House Norjah. Why'd Madri send Riltana here? How did Madri even know enough about Riltana's love life to send her after the painting of Queen Cyndra? And just what was Madri, a ghost? Someone pretending to be her? He suspected she was indeed the real deal, if reduced to a vengeful spirit bent on stalking him. And pulling strings behind the scenes to yank the rug out from under him so he would fall and never get back up. Just like I did when I killed her, he thought.

"Last time I was here," said Riltana, "I entered through the servant's quarters."

"We're not here to sneak in," he said. He tugged the bell pull again.

After a span of several moments, something clicked and the door opened.

Behind it stood a genasi hardly older than Jaul.

“Greetings. I am Ethred Norjah. What’s your business?” The genasi was dressed in the livery of a manservant, but introduced himself as a family member.

How does that work? wondered Demascus. Normally noble sons and daughters weren’t pressed into service in their own residences.

Then again, Demascus supposed, normally noble houses were not shot through with vampires. The bylaws and traditions of a secret vampire house probably had more than a few oddities, beyond the obvious bits about nightlife and grave dirt. And anyway, Ethred apparently hadn’t yet been brought into the fold; the cloudy light wasn’t bothering him in the least. Instead of burning to a crisp, he only squinted when a shaft of sunlight broke through the overcast and fell into his eyes.

“We’re here to see Kasdrian,” Demascus announced.

“Impossible,” snapped Ethred. “Lord Kasdrian is indisposed. You’ll have to make an appointment. And maybe not even then. I don’t recognize you. Come back in a tenday.”

“Not going to happen, blister,” said Riltana.

Ethred glanced at the windsoul. His eyes widened. “You’re the one who took the paintings!”

“Listen,” said Demascus, “We’re not on your stoop selling sugar cakes. We’re here because we just witnessed Lady Ascension fall. We have one of your stolen Whispering Children; we’d like to return it. So go tell Kasdrian or whoever you need to that he damn well better get indisposed!”

Ethred wiped his brow. Maybe he’s younger than Jaul after all, Demascus thought. The Norjah genasi looked behind him into the darkened foyer, swallowed, and said, “Come in. Wait here. I’ll … um, I’ll get someone.”

They entered a paneled room fitted with a single lantern burning on the side wall. Strawberries, apples, and

pomegranates dripped in languid profusion from a smorgasbord of platters on a long table. Demascus breathed in the heady aroma.

Ethred shut the door and drew the bolt. Then he tugged three times on a leather cord dangling from the ceiling. Demascus strained to hear a distant bell or some other kind of reaction, but sensed nothing. And he saw no obvious exits. Apparently, Ethred disliked the lack of response. He tugged three more times on the pull, faster this time, as if he was desperate.

“I don’t like this,” said Chant.

Demascus agreed. He rounded on Ethred. “Explain to me exactly what’s going on, because otherwise we might jump to conclusions.”

“I summoned a … senior member of the family, as you asked. If I’d tugged just once, or cried out, or remained silent, this room would now be flooded with … countermeasures.”

The charm in Demascus’s hair, the one his prior incarnation had been given by Oghma, gave a tiny shiver. Ethred was lying.

“What’s he mean by countermeasures?” said Jaul.

“He means,” the pawnbroker said, “poison gas, a pit beneath our feet, maybe a volley of arrows from hidden archers. Something like that. You probably saw similar in Raneger’s private rooms.”

Demascus interrupted, “A senior family member, Ethred? Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

The genasi licked his lips and his eyes darted. “The countermeasures—you’d already know if I’d activated them. They’re a torrent of flesh-eating scarabs that pour in from those high vents. They eat anything alive or dead. Except they’ve been conditioned to avoid anything that smells of the Norjah bloodline.”

“Don’t overestimate the beetles’ discretion,” a new voice said.

Ethred jerked his gaze to the ceiling, and he gasped.

The formless voice continued, “We’ve lost more than a few of the family to scarab frenzy. Bear that in mind next time you signal for their deployment, young one. Lucky for our guests, and maybe lucky for you, I was awake and monitoring the entrance. The beetles will go hungry for a little while longer.”

“You little rat-snuggler!” Riltana yelled at Ethred.

Ethred ignored the windsoul. His wide-eyed regard was riveted on the empty ceiling. “Forgive me, Lord Kasdrian!”

With a whisper, the cramped ceiling swung sideways to reveal a vast, arch-supported chamber. Candles in the thousands twinkled in niches that climbed the chamber’s curving walls. Bats chased fluttering shadows high above the windowless expanse. The entrance foyer in which they stood was revealed to be a lowly pit. A figure in porcelain-white robes lounged on a prodigious stone chair—as much sarcophagus as furnishing—that was perched on the pit’s edge.

“Lord Kasdrian?” said Demascus. He stilled his instinct to reach for his weapons, his Veil, or a sliver of shadow.

“That’s me,” said the figure. His features were hidden beneath a white hood, but faint red glimmers marked his eyes. “And you’re Demascus, newcomer to Airspur and friend to Riltana the windsoul. Perhaps you should pick better friends. Have you come to collect the reward I posted on her and spare your own life?”

“I’ve come to return what I took,” Riltana called up. “None of this is his fault.”

The white-robed figure focused his eyes on Riltana. “Demascus defended you. And between you, you killed several Norjah enforcers beyond the recall of even their graves. Lady Ascension witnessed it. The deva will share your punishment.”

“Lord,” said Ethred, his voice small. “They say Lady Ascension fell.” The figure stiffened.

Oh great, thought Demascus. Maybe I shouldn't have let that detail slip. "Lord Kasdrian, we're not your foes. We're here to return what was taken, and to offer apologies. It was not Riltana's intention to bring strife to your home. But I'm afraid it's true; Lady Ascension is no more, though it was not through our doing."

The figure slumped. But not in grief, as Demascus first thought. Kasdrian threw off his hood, and the pale genasi features, overly developed canines and all, were writ large with relief. "That's the first *good* news I've heard in months," he said, then laughed. The echoes chased the bats around the high columns.

"I don't understand. Isn't she your agent?" said Demascus.

"Lady Ascension was thrust upon me. She was a conniver, an agent of another power. I'd have slain her myself if I could've gotten away with it cleanly, without her peers being the wiser."

"The Rune Court," said Chant. 'Who're they?' I asked the lady, and she as much as confirmed the court is part of the Twisted Rune. Which I've heard of, even though they're supposed to be secret …"

Kasdrian let his regard fall on the pawnbroker. Chant blanched.

Demascus raised his hands. "We don't really care, do we, Chant? No, we don't. Good enough that we haven't further hurt our relationship with House Norjah. Right?"

Chant nodded. The pawnbroker's insatiable thirst for secrets made him a good ally, but right now he was antagonizing a stranger with his incessant questions.

Kasdrian studied Chant with narrowed eyes a moment longer. "If you don't know, I'll not be the one to enlighten you. Let's just say that with Ascension's death, and your return of the paintings, perhaps we can come to an accord."

Riltana said, "I only—"

"Show the nice noble the painting, won't you, Riltana?" said Demascus. If Kasdrian saw one, he might take the news

better that they didn’t have both.

The windsoul nodded. She made a wide gesture, and suddenly clutched the ornately framed painting she’d shown Demascus in the shadow tower. She angled it up so the lord of House Norjah could see the figure illustrated on the canvas.

“The Thief,” said Kasdrian, “Always the one most likely to be stolen. Because it wants to be.” He sighed. “But I’m glad to see it back where it belongs.”

Riltana leaned the painting down by the wall, face toward the wall. Ethred shuffled over to protect it.

Kasdrian appeared in the foyer pit, between Riltana and Demascus. If not for the breath of dank air that blew Demascus’s hair back, the deva would have thought Kasdrian had stepped between shadows instantaneously. But no—the vampire was just fast. Faster than Lady Ascension. Too fast to see. Faster even than me?

“And the other missing Whispering Child?” said the noble, his red eyes on Riltana.

“Interesting story, that,” said the windsoul, sidling away, but finding her back against a paneled wall. “I didn’t take it.”

“Which *is* interesting,” continued Demascus. This close, he appreciated that Kasdrian was *tall*. At least six and a half feet. “Because Riltana was lured here, having been told she’d find something in House Norjah’s gallery she’s been hunting. Lured here by someone called Madri. Do you know her?”

“Never heard of her. Who’s she?”

The charm hanging from his single braid didn’t so much as quiver. The vampire lord was telling the truth. Damn. Swallowing disappointment, Demascus continued, “She’s an old acquaintance of mine, someone I haven’t seen in … decades. But she or someone impersonating her sent Riltana to look for a mundane painting of Akanûl’s last regent. Which I assume you don’t have?”

“Cyndra? No. That old hag was nothing but trouble. Besides, my gallery is for a very special set of paintings. You say this Madri lured you,” he returned his attention to the windsoul, “here?”

She nodded.

“And you found your way to the gallery and took the Thief. How convenient.”

“Which I’ve just returned.”

Kasdrian waved that off. “But you claim you *didn’t* take the Necromancer. Now, tell me true, no evasions.” Kasdrian’s eyes fastened on Riltana’s.

The windsoul stiffened. She said in a strained voice, “I said I didn’t take it!”

“I believe you,” said Kasdrian, and shuttered the fire of his gaze. Without the red light burning there, Kasdrian’s eyes were green.

The thief took a relieved breath.

“But someone took the Necromancer the same night as this piece went on walkabout. Perhaps the person who stole it was, who’d you say, Madri? Maybe she lured this poor suggestible windsoul to my home as a distraction. While my hunters and Lady Ascension left to give chase, your long-absent friend helped herself to the Whispering Child specializing in all things undead.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL

19 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

"ALL THINGS UNDEAD?" REPEATED DEMASCUS.

"Just so," said Kasdrian. "The Necromancer. One of the most dangerous of the Whispering Children. This one," he pointed to the painting Riltana had produced, "knows nearly all there is about thieving. But the Necromancer knows a dangerous sum about reanimating flesh and spirit. Moreover, the Necromancer is somewhat … temperamental."

Oh great, thought Demascus. Madri's vengeful ghost is going to empower itself using the Necromancer. Was that what she was planning?

As if reading his mind, Kasdrian said, "Why would your acquaintance want such a thing?"

"I honestly don't know," said Demascus. Which was true—despite his speculation, what did he really know for certain? Damn little. "Besides, it's only your guess that Madri was the one who took it."

Kasdrian spread his hands and said, "It's the simplest answer that fits the facts."

"What *are* the Whispering Children?" said Chant. "Who painted them and imbued them with such power?"

Kasdrian shimmered and was gone. Demascus followed the direction of his whipping hair and saw the vampire back in the high chair, grinning. The portrait of the Thief leaned against the chair's side. This time, instead of seeming impressively scary, the noble's antics struck Demascus as just this side of childish. But how much more childish was his own urge to lean into a shadow and show Kasdrian he wasn't the only one able to move with such alacrity? He

shook his head; the lord of House Norjah was probably only going easy on them because he thought they were too far beneath him. He didn't want to disabuse the vampire of that attitude. Or, mused Damascus, it could be that the noble was still riding high on the news of Lady Ascension's fall, and in that glow, was willing to entertain even thieves in his home.

When Kasdrian saw everyone had located him again, he pointed at Chant and said, "The paintings are really none of *your* business, are they?"

"True enough, Lord," said Chant. "But perhaps we can barter. I am a keeper of secrets, and perhaps I know things, especially regarding current events, that you would be interested in."

Kasdrian lifted an eyebrow. "I've heard of you and your network, Morven. I think we could come to some arrangement. What I know about the paintings isn't widely known. If I tell you, you must agree to discover a secret for me. What that secret is and when I'll demand it—next month or next year—is not subject to debate. I'll show up on your doorstep to claim it. Is that agreeable?"

Chant gave a curt nod. "It's the way I prefer to work."

Kasdrian clapped his hand. "Good. Because I'm feeling magnanimous. And really, what's the use of an exclusive collection if no one knows its significance? Very well, Morven, I'll tell you. But be warned; if I learn a single word of this has filtered into the ears of anyone outside this chamber, I'll find you and suck you dry."

"Ah, yes, of course," said Chant. Demascus wondered if the pawnbroker took Kasdrian's threat seriously. Hopefully. They were here to *remove* House Norjah from their list of foes, not gather kindling for further animosity.

"Oghma the God of Knowledge," began Kasdrian, "had many children not long after claiming godhead."

Demascus started upon hearing Oghma's name on the vampire's lips. The god of knowledge was the deva's patron;

at least, the patron of his last incarnation.

“Each child of the Binder,” continued Kasdrian, “was a demigod in its own right, and as each gained power, a handful chose to specialize their knowledge. They each pledged to learn all they could on a single topic and to master that subject. Some studied healing, some abjuring, some alchemy, some games of chance, and so on.”

Demascus reached for the charm in his hair. It was payment from the Binder of Knowledge for accepting a contract that ultimately led to Demascus’s discovery of Kalkan. In the name of all the lords of light and shadow … If the Whispering Children were Oghma’s, the situation was more than mere coincidence.

More like connivance! The deva wondered if Kasdrian knew of his connection to Oghma. Was that Kasdrian’s game? Was all of this an elaborate trap? Demascus rested a hand on the Veil, still wrapped innocently around his neck like a simple scarf. If Kasdrian tried anything, he wouldn’t find Demascus unprepared …

The vampire lord was still talking, making elaborate hand gestures illustrating his story. Demascus tried to catch up …

“The god Cyric, father of lies, was jealous of Oghma’s brood. Worse, he despised the God of Knowledge’s pride in his demigod children. So he devised a plan to lure those children away from Oghma, and so to himself. Being young and overconfident in their power, many listened when Cyric promised to deliver to each child a piece of understanding that would crown their expertise.”

“Who’d be stupid enough to believe Cyric?” said Riltana. “He’s the gods damned God of Lies!” Jaul snickered.

Kasdrian said, his voice somewhat sour, “This was long ago.”

“Go on,” urged Demascus and Chant almost in the same voice.

“Back then, Cyric’s full turpitude wasn’t universally appreciated, especially by the brash godlings. Twenty-two

fell to Cyric's deceit, and so were bound by him. Cyric forged their souls into artifacts of wonder, whose knowledge could be used against even the gods. But especially against Oghma. These were the Whispering Children. However, before he could display his creation, he was deprived of every last painting by the late Mystra, Goddess of Magic. Few deities could stand against the one who could deprive them of their access to the Weave. But when Mystra tried to revert the Whispering Children to their proper guise, the paintings were scattered far and wide, thanks to a last spiteful trick of Cyric's."

"Not so scattered anymore; you've got several," said Riltana.

Kasdrian's mouth stretched into a pointy-toothed predator's grin. "Many have sought to reunite the paintings, for their own reasons. Oghma wishes to release his captured offspring. Others merely desire to learn the lore held by each Whispering Child. I … well, *I* am a mere art aficionado." He laughed as if at the absurdity of his own claim.

"Yeah, I doubt you've ever questioned any of these for your own benefit," said Chant, sounding jealous.

The vampire winked. "In my sixty years of collecting, I've hung seven of the paintings in my gallery. Because of Riltana's break-in a few nights ago, I was down to just five. But since you've taken Ascension off my hands *and* you've repatriated the Thief, I'm feeling more positive about things. Despite the fact that I can no longer count the Necromancer as part of my collection."

"Sorry about that," said Riltana.

"Which brings me to my last point. Recover my stolen Whispering Child. Do me this favor, and House Norjah will count you as friends, not prey."



They agreed, of course. They even gave Kasdrian the impression that finding the Necromancer would be their

number one priority. Which wasn't even entirely a lie. If Madri's spirit was involved, Demascus wanted to know. Moreover, if a vengeful Madri had a painting whose subject was a talkative demigod of death, it was probably in his best interest to deprive her of it, the sooner the better. And … he wanted to see this woman he only remembered in storm-cloud glimpses. A woman so extraordinary that a previous version of himself had loved her. Then betrayed her.

Queen Arathane's task remained undone, too. Unless she received actionable intelligence to argue against it, the Four Stewards would plunge Akanûl into a moronic war with Tymanther, which would only further mask a drow plot that already connected a Demonweb entrance beneath Airspur. He should probably report the portal's existence to Queen Arathane.

But even before all of those things …

Back at his place, Demascus sniffed his bedroom. Sandalwood, mint, and orange blossom odors curled through the air, though not quite as overwhelmingly strong as he'd been going for. So he added another spoon of incense to the coal pot. The pot sat in the center of a circle he'd created by arranging his scarf on the floor and stretching it out to its full length.

The circle matched a few cryptic instructions from the Veil itself. He'd done something like this in a previous life. That time, he'd been trying to contact a god whose holy symbol was a stylized eye and whose name he could no longer recall.

It didn't matter. The important thing was, he needed answers from Oghma. Something was very fishy. The god of knowledge hadn't been entirely honest with the previous version of himself. Oghma had commissioned the deva's last incarnation to heal the discord in the Binder's church—a fancy way of requesting the assassination of the leader of a troublesome Oghmanite faction. Demascus hadn't found the faction leader he was supposed to slay—instead, he'd been

led to Kalkan, the “Swordbreaker,” the one who’d been killing each of Demascus’s previous incarnations, one after another down through the decades. Kalkan had managed to remain unnoticed by the Whorl of Ioun, the artifact upon which the deva depended to keep his continuity of ability and identity intact between lives. So Demascus never even realized he was the victim of serial murder.

Except the last time the Swordbreaker ambushed him. Thanks to what the deva had assumed was Oghma’s benevolent eye, Kalkan was finally revealed. Demascus remembered Kalkan despite losing the Whorl … or maybe because he lost it; he wasn’t clear on that point. He sometimes speculated that not finding the Whorl was the best thing that’d ever happened to him. However, he could not recover the bulk of his abilities and identity as the Sword of the Gods, except for brief moments when he could trigger an echo of the Sword’s fantastic but terrifying persona in himself.

Demascus regarded the circle. He breathed in the incense. Oghma hadn’t told him the entire truth. The god was troubled by something at least as bad as a fractious church—the god’s children were trapped in canvas prisons and being exploited by whoever could claim them. Is that *really* why the Binder of Knowledge had taken Demascus under his wing? To involve him, and by extension Madri, in a self-serving quest to find his Whispering Children? If so, why hadn’t Oghma merely asked the Sword of the Gods to take on that task directly? Maybe because it wasn’t a straightforward assassination … He had to know. And the cagey Veil wouldn’t answer him on the topic.

Demascus laid the bifurcated blades of *Exorcessum* on the floor so the points of each sword aimed at the incense pot.

And last, but most important … He unwound Oghma’s charm from his hair. He touched it to his forehead, his lips, and then clapped it between his facing palms.

“I invoke thee, by the power of *Exorcessum*, by the power of the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge, by the promise native to the payment you vouchsafed me. Oghma, Binder of Knowledge, I call thee! Answer!”

The daylight through the drawn blinds flickered out. A roseate glow replaced it, emanating from every surface, even his normally milky skin. The house lurched. One corner of the room seemed to drop five feet. Demascus staggered as his boots lost contact with the floor. He dropped to his hands and knees, accidentally losing the charm as he scrambled for a stable surface.

The golden scroll fell like a hammer. It splintered the floor. He slapped his palms onto the hardwood planks and dug his toes into the seams. He paid for it with splinters, but avoided pitching out of the circle and into the slewed wall. The coal pot, swords, and scarf didn’t so much as shiver, as if only he was affected by the skewed orientation of reality. The pinkish light in the chamber died away until the only illumination pulsed from the scroll charm, alternating between white and red, fast as a heartbeat.

Demascus focused on the glow. Despite his suddenly rapid breathing, he was elated. All this drama and effect—his plan must be working. The light danced quicker, brighter. He squinted, as if trying to stare down the sunrise. Gradually, it occurred to him that it was more akin to peering through the keyhole into a brilliantly lit chamber. A space with pillars, grand banners, and stirring music.

Then a flutter of metallic wings obscured his image of the divine audience hall, as if something just on the other side of his tiny window had purposefully moved to obscure his view. Annoyance jabbed him.

“I seek an audience with Oghma,” he said.

The reflective feathers fluttered but continued to obstruct his view. A melodic voice echoed off the walls of his bedroom, saying, “What arrogance, world-bound creature, that you demand an audience with a god.”

Surprised tinged Demascus's response. "I have the right! I have—"

The voice interrupted, "I admit you have a few of the implements and a scatter of memories of the Sword of the Gods. But you are not he. You are the merest shade of your previous selves. Your continuity is broken, perhaps never to be reforged."

Demascus's throat tightened as anger kindled. "No, that's not true. I'm the Sword, or will be again soon. Who are *you*, angel, to gainsay me? I'm Demascus! And I determine my own fate!" He stopped talking because the charm had ceased glowing. It lay like a piece of faux jewelry on a floor which no longer seemed to tilt and upon which the ordinary light of day now lay in thin slats of dust motes. He blinked a couple of times as realization washed over him. The ritual had failed. Oghma, or an angelic minion, had terminated it before he could ask his questions.

"Burning dominions!" yelled Demascus. "What is this? Have I been denied?"

Yes, he had. His bid to find answers had been unceremoniously nixed.

It ... it wasn't right. It wasn't *fair!* When the gods needed something, usually something terrible and secret, they contacted him, no matter the issue. Plucking him from wherever he was and whatever he was doing, no matter its importance. To help *them*. But when *he* needed help, nothing. A tremor sifted through him.

It wasn't just. Why did people worship, if not for hope of aid in a time of need? By all that was holy and sovereign, *this* was his time of need! Damn it all, he couldn't even figure out how to recharge the dimmed runes on *Exorcessum!*

Then it came to him why Oghma hadn't answered his plea.

The god of knowledge—like all the others—considered him a mere tool. Powerful and potent once, but a tool all the same, easy to discard once dulled or broken. And lacking the

Whorl of Ioun, this was probably an apt description of his current state.

"I'm more than the Sword," he whispered, "I'm me. And I'm not a contrivance or a pawn." The golden scroll in the floor appeared dull and common. He leaned over it. "I'm not a plaything!" he yelled, directing his fury at the trinket. "I'm Demascus!"

He picked it up from the floor with unsteady hands. He should lock it away, throw it into the Sea of Fallen Stars … Or maybe feed it to a drake.

"It might be time to renounce my service to the gods," he told it. The scroll shivered, ever so slightly, in his grip—

Someone knocked on the door. "You all right in there, Demascus?" came Riltana's muffled voice. "We heard yelling."

Demascus went to the door and jerked it open. Riltana was there, and Chant. Down the hall in his living room he saw only Jaul's dusty boots, propped up on his battered coffee table.

"I'm fine," he said, trying to modulate emotions that stretched him tight as a lute string.

"That's good," said Riltana, "Because we have a visitor. And she's furious."

"Who is it? Is it … Madri? Has she—"

"No, it's the queen. She can't believe it's been almost three days and we haven't visited the mine yet. You're in the shit, my friend."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

19 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Madri danced with the thunder on flickering steps, following the storm north. Out where the lightning split the sea, she watched the coast. Golden sun rays broke upon the cliffs like hope. But on the face of the wine-dark water, the stabbing light mirrored her fury. If she could've directed the jagged brightness into Fossil's smooth facade instead, she wouldn't have hesitated.

Fossil! She despised the gods-abandoned thing. Ordering her around like a slave, threatening her with a return to nothingness should she fail to enact its least dictum … As if she wouldn't have alerted the Norjah vampires to Demascus's location anyway! Anything to trouble the deva, trip him up, and inflict him with loss. It galled her. If not for Fossil, she wouldn't have any existence at all. If not for Kalkan's slowly reanimating shell, she'd have no purpose. If not for …

Wait. Hold on. The angel was a servant of *Cyric*. How could she believe anything it said? In fact … Her snarling grimace faded. Fossil, in trying to confuse her with half truths and battling lies, had once implied she was a ghost it raised. Then later it said she was formed by Demascus's memories of her; that she was just a "figment." Which sounded implausible, except for one salient point—she'd felt the twist in the core of her being when Demascus's sword had split. Which suggested she didn't owe her existence to Fossil or to Kalkan. Her spirit would have returned regardless, drawn across the years by her psychic residue released by

Exorcessum. The only thing Kalkan had accomplished was to foresee her appearance, then guide her vengeance.

A vengeance she would've pursued without any direction. Thus her alliance with Kalkan's will and the all-too-active Fossil seemed perfect. On paper. In reality, though, she was done. Done working with the angel, done following the Swordbreaker's plan. Her resolution brought a new pang; if she went her own way now, how would she make Demascus pay?

The last salvo of the receding storm shivered the water like the echo of some unimaginable weapon. "I wish I had such a weapon," she said. Then she smiled. Because, by all the spells of Halruaa, she *did*.

Flicker.

The secret crypt was silent. The mask was gone again, or hiding. If the latter, her plan would fail before it was begun. After all, maybe Kalkan had foreseen her eventual rebellion, too, in which case her actions were already calculated into Fossil and the Swordbreaker's plan. She froze with indecision, one hand reaching for the Necromancer's covering shroud. Madri remembered her last conversation with the mask. What had it said? Something about Kalkan's prophecy being uncertain whether *Exorcessum* would split or not? Normally, divinations of the future blurred only a few hours forward, because nothing can anticipate all outcomes. Random acts cause event ripples, and ripples beget more ripples. Eventually, even a god's ability to model possible outcomes failed.

Fossil's admission hinted that moment was fast approaching. Madri flipped the cover from the Necromancer's face. "How can I most easily destroy Fossil, who is an undead revenant of an angel?"

The painted regard shivered like a hive of wasps on the verge of disgorging its stinging colony. She swallowed down the imaginary contents of her stomach. "It is not within your power as you currently exist."

“So Fossil can’t be destroyed?”

“I did not say that. It is a spirit tied to a physical relic of its prior existence. Sever that tie, and the animation ceases.”

Madri wanted to punch her fist through the painting. For all the good that would likely do—she was immaterial. She squashed the urge and said, “If I can’t do it, who can?”

“I could, if bidden. It’s only a matter of—”

An acid voice overtopped the Necromancer’s papery revelation, “What are you doing, Madri?”

Madri whirled. The mask hovered a foot from her, its empty eye slots an accusation.

“Fossil! You … you startled me. I was just making sure the Necromancer was all right,” she said. Her words sounded like a child’s lie even to herself. She’d been caught, no two ways about it.

“You were conversing with the Whispering Child. Which I expressly forbade you. You’ve grown headstrong, Madri, even more so than Kalkan feared. Unacceptable. And dangerous. It’s time—”

“Aren’t you curious what the Necromancer told me?” she said, her voice high with nervous energy. The mask ceased speaking to study her. Though it moved not an inch, she imagined she could detect its conflict.

Finally the mask said, “Anything you say is suspect. So let’s find out straight from the source, shall we? Madri, remove the cover.”

The shroud obscuring the portrait had fallen back into place. Oh, gods, how was she going to get out of this? Should she flicker away? Could she, with the mask watching her? Its attention seemed to pin her manifestation in place. Maybe if the Necromancer distracted the angel, she could make a break for it.

“Now!” commanded Fossil.

She twitched the painting’s cowl away. Unlike before, the Necromancer was already very much awake—the textured lines of its brutal features seemed to breathe.

“What were you telling this sad haunt, Necromancer?” said Fossil.

“Confidential,” answered the painting. “Only with permission will I disclose my dealings with any previous viewer.”

Flicker.

Nothing changed—she hadn’t gone anywhere.

Flicker.

Now she stood next to the heap of earth under which Kalkan lay. But she was still in the crypt with an irate angel fragment. Once more—

The mask tilted its regard to her. “You’re not going anywhere.”

It wasn’t lying. Her ability to wink between moments was gone. But she convulsively tried to trigger it anyway, over and over.

“Tell the Necromancer to tell me what it whispered to you, or your time is up.”

“You’re going to destroy me, anyway.”

“I can do it painlessly. Or in such a fashion that your soul is sliced away over the course of a thousand years in an Abyssal pocket plane. Which would you prefer?”

“Necromancer,” she said with a shaking voice, “I bid you to demonstrate to Fossil what we last discussed.”

The painting’s illustrated mouth puckered into what might have been a smile, though it just as easily could have been a contortion of torment. “Listen then, Fossil. This is a secret few know.”

It started to chant. The words were unfamiliar to Madri, but their guttural tones suggested some kind of arcane tongue, or a language spoken by proto-beings of ancient ages. As each chanted couplet finished, its sound didn’t die away. The words remained in the background, drawn out in a long hum. Layer upon layer of words grew on the initial scaffold of sound, creating a texture of noise that she could almost

see. The construct of ominous resonance reminded her of a gate….

Fossil stared raptly into the widening aperture, oblivious of its peril. Then the Whispering Child spat out the keystone—it sounded like the death throes of a wounded beast.

The “gate” swung open. Only then did Fossil realize the demonstration was real, that *it* was the focus of the chant. “Necromancer, I command you to—”

A skeletal hand three sizes larger than a human’s reached through the gap. The hand fumbled about the chamber as if feeling around inside a satchel for a spare coin.

The mask screamed, “No! Not possible! Not—” Fossil should have kept quiet. The reaching fingers snatched the floating facade. A blast of radiant energy tinged with a nauseating swirl of necrotic mist enveloped Fossil. In that fell light, the mask blackened, bent, and broke into two pieces.

The hand retracted. The fragments of Fossil clattered to the floor—two half masks, split in a jagged line down the center.

The last echoes of the chant died away. No remnant of the “gate,” the skeletal hand, or Fossil’s cruel demeanor remained in the vault.

Madri glanced sidelong at the painting, eyes half-lidded just in case the portrait’s regard was turned on her … but no. The Necromancer had apparently exhausted itself, and its painted eyes were closed.

“Well, Kalkan Swordbreaker,” she said after many silent moments, “I bet you didn’t foresee *that*. Next time, pick better minions.” Whether “better” meant less rebellious or less dictatorial, she wasn’t sure.

But the pile of soil had no answer for her. She suspected the rakshasa wouldn’t be thrilled that she’d destroyed Fossil. On the other hand, she supposed she’d still go through with Fossil’s plan to use the Necromancer to hurry the rakshasa’s

passage through death and on to his next incarnation. In which case the Swordbreaker would be in her debt.

“But first things first,” she said. “When I’ve finished with Demascus, he’ll wish he’d never been reborn.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The City of Airspur, Akanûl

20 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Chant Morven watched waves break on the ship's prow and collapse behind the speeding vessel. An hour out of the Bay of Airspur and already the Akanûl coast was a haze across the southern horizon of the Sea of Fallen Stars.

The pawnbroker squinted, for the dozenth time, at the elaborate wooden sculpture below the bowsprit. The figure's shimmering green scales did nothing for its modesty, though he supposed any ship called *Green Siren* deserved just such a fantastic figurehead.

But a painted and lightly enchanted piece of wood couldn't hold a candle to the very much alive and angry queen standing at the ship's prow. The queen's stained leather armor and cape weren't royal finery, but they bespoke martial competence and elegance in one go. The cape flared in the wind of the ship's passage, cracking with occasional tiny lightning sparks. The ship's captain stood near the queen, playing with his pipe and yelling occasional directions to his crew.

Leaning along the rail, Jaul and Riltana traded off-color jokes. Riltana obviously had a far larger wealth of material to draw upon than poor Jaul. As for Demascus, he alternated between staring out at the sea and frowning at Arathane's profile. Chant shook his head. If he'd been the recipient of the regent of Akanûl's recrimination, he'd do more than frown. He'd cry.

When the queen had appeared at Demascus's home, she'd been seething. Chant imagined she'd had to restrain herself from slapping the deva when he finished his ritual and

emerged from his chamber. She made an acid comment about how she hoped Demascus's sleep had been restful, because the Four Stewards were drawing up war declaration documents against Tymanther for lack of any alternate intelligence on the mining disruption! Ouch.

The deva didn't offer any excuses about pursuing vampires, about the Demonweb, or about a ghost of a past victim doing who knew what with a necromantic artifact. He'd merely said, "Now that the storm is blown over, the ship I chartered can take us out to the mine."

Electricity rolled down the queen like water. "I'm going with you."

"That would—" began Demascus.

"Because otherwise, how will I know you'll actually go to the island? You might get distracted by a big fish or a boat race on the way."

Chant saw Riltana wince. The queen wasn't the master of colorful invectives like the thief, but Arathane's barbs dug deeper.

Demascus's eyes narrowed. "Fine. We can use another sword."

Spear, not sword, thought Chant as he looked at the queen's armament. But he'd learned a long time ago that wry observations are not always appreciated in the spirit in which they're offered.

Thankfully, Jaul remained too awestruck by the ruler's presence to offer up any witty repartee of his own. He was like Chant that way, but less practiced with the tact. So they raced across the sea, sails straining and resentments simmering. Onward to an uncharted place Arathane called Ithimir Isle.

Captain Thoster cleared his throat. "Anything in particular I should be on the lookout for, Your Royal Highness?"

The queen sighed. "Be ready for anything. Every force we've sent to investigate has failed to return."

The captain grunted, as if in surprise. He looked at Demascus. “Did you mention that? I think I’d have remembered if you mentioned that. We may need to renegotiate terms.”

“Captain,” said Arathane, “I’m not unreasonable. Trust me that you’ll be justly rewarded for your aid. But *now* is not the time. Ithimir Isle is before us.”

She pointed starboard. Chant and everyone else looked to the right of the prow, straining to locate what the queen indicated.

“I don’t see anything,” complained Jaul.

Neither did Chant, but he held his tongue.

“No?” said the Queen. She hummed a few off-key notes, then said, “How about now?”

“I … Yes!” said Jaul.

Chant heard gasps spring up across the deck. A stretch of water peeled away, revealing a stone spur striated with a craze of chalky lines. The spur emerged from the sea at an angle, as if leaning. Chant guessed it wasn’t a natural island. More like some foreign chunk of bedrock cast into the sky that fell back to the world far from its origin. If so, it hadn’t happened long enough ago for the pounding waves to break the shear lines of the spur into a coast.

“Where’s it from?” said Chant.

The queen glanced back at him. “Very perceptive, Morven. Indeed, Ithimir is not a formation native to the Sea of Fallen Stars. Or even Toril. It came from Abeir, in the aftermath of the Year of Blue Fire.”

“Ah.” Of course. Chant nodded. Like the genasi three generations ago. The people of Akanûl had become part of Faerûn’s economic and social fabric only since their arrival. And so, apparently, had Ithimir Isle—the economic fabric, anyway. However, a mysterious force of drow lusted after the same mineral hidden inside the stone spur that Akanûl so valued.

Chant supposed that, given half a chance, he wouldn't mind becoming a broker for such a valued substance himself. In truth, it hardly seemed fair, from a purely mercantile point of view, anyhow, that the state had claimed the entire mine, thus precluding all the potential profits to middlemen from arambarium sale and distribution.

Once they finished here, perhaps he'd see if he could somehow ease his way into the operation. After all, he was on a first-name basis with the queen herself. Well, almost.

A small port protruded from one sheer side of the isle, supported by dark pillars. A single extended pier was heavy with shadow. No activity stirred the port. A half-scuttled ship listed to one side of the pier.

"Lay anchor!" commanded the captain. The dull clunk of running sea chain chipped the air.

"What, here?" said Arathane. "We're still a half mile off."

"You think I'm daft enough to risk this ship by putting into a port that's already eaten at least two other expeditions? This ain't my first ship, Your Royal Highness. I lost the first, and it made me careful. I don't want to be out the coin to build *Green Siren III*. We'll send you over in a skiff, and remain safely anchored here. Or maybe even farther back, now that you got me thinking about it." The captain walked down the deck and called for his crew to make the skiff ready.

"Is the queen coming with us over to the island?" Jaul whispered to Chant and Riltana.

Chant frowned. *Us?* He didn't want his son going over to the island for the same reason the captain didn't want to tie up there. But he bit back that sentiment. Voicing it would only anger the touchy young man.

"Looks like it," Riltana said. "And her two bodyguards."

Right. The two genasi who'd accompanied the queen were elite peacemakers, though they wore unadorned leather instead of their usual elaborately detailed armor hung with medals and stamped with the Akanûl's royal coat of arms.

Their strength combined with the queen's power, not to mention the talents of Demascus, Riltana, and himself, weren't inconsequential. And Jaul was probably passing fair with his daggers, if push came to shove.

A ringing clang drew their eyes to starboard. The skiff bumped over the deck railing and dropped into the swell. "Easy, you motherless biters!" yelled Thoster to his crew. The landing party clambered down the rope ladder one at a time and settled into the skiff. Then it pulled away from the slowly bobbing *Green Siren*.

Thoster waved from the deck, hat in his hands to form a flopping semaphore flag. "Good luck! You've got three days before I write you all off as shark bait!"

Spray from the sweeping oars chilled Chant's face. The tang of sea salt and iodine burned his nose.

The skiff approached the pier. No one spoke; everyone's attention was riveted on the shore. The pawnbroker squinted. The dimness seemed even thicker now, almost like something tangible.

"Something's not right about those shadows," he said.

"They're not shadows," Demascus said. "They're spiderwebs."

The rowers ceased their efforts.

"Son of a piss-pickled leech," said Riltana.

"Can anybody see the spiders that wove them?" Arathane asked.

Demascus shook his head. "But I bet that's what closed down the port. A swarm of crawlers unleashed by our drow adversary, Chenraya."

"I've always said you were a canny fellow," said Riltana. "Certainly none of us could have come up with such an astounding conclusion."

Chant couldn't help chuckling as some of the tension on the boat dissipated. But not all—whatever had spun all those webs was either very large or made up of way too many individual spinners.

“My point, dear Riltana,” said Demascus with a hint of a smile, “is that we’ve already gathered valuable intelligence for Akanûl. Have you ever heard of dragonborn using webbing as weapons? Tymanther is the least likely culprit here. The Four Stewards are on the wrong track.”

“Keep rowing,” commanded the queen. “We need to make certain. If it turns out Tymanther is secretly allied with these drow, I’d willingly give up my crown if I came so close to the truth and then turned away.” They closed the remaining distance. The two genasi crew tied up the skiff midway along the pier. The webs obscuring the long jetty lay like drifted, translucent snow. Demascus disembarked first, followed by the queen’s peacemakers.

“No immediate danger, your Highness,” said one. “Come on up.”

Chant watched Demascus to see if he agreed. The deva was studying the pier and the port structures beyond it. His silence apparently meant he agreed with the bodyguard’s assessment.

The pawnbroker pulled himself up the gritty rungs. Only the two rowers stayed in the skiff—they’d already opened a chest filled with biscuits and a bag of wine.

Chant contemplated their repast. “You fellows should probably untie and push off a dozen yards. Something could come nosing through the webs while we’re gone. Spiders big enough to spin this much web *probably* couldn’t swim out to you.”

The rowers traded glances, then moved to untie the mooring lines.

Demascus took point as their landing party trooped down the pier, wending between mounds of webbing. The structures around the port were carved into the bare rock of the isle. All the windows and doors were clogged with gray strands like sickly scabs, except for one cavity on the side of the largest structure. The opening was wide enough to fit

four or five carriages simultaneously, despite the sides being coated in webbing.

“That’s the main depot,” said Queen Arathane. “Obviously the webs are new since I was here two years ago.”

“Yeah, we figured,” murmured Riltana.

“It reminds me of the Demonweb,” Jaul said.

Chant agreed. The weave of gray strands masked the original shape of the mine depot entrance, giving it the semblance of an open mouth. They moved closer.

Daylight filtered into the wider space inside. Smashed crates and overturned ore carts lay in abandoned heaps on the floor. Dozens of cocoons hung from web lines suspended from the ceiling.

Jaul gasped. Chant saw it at the same time—a hand protruded from one cocoon, and a desiccated earthsoul face peered out from another, its eyes fixed in an eternal stare by sticky strands. Chant drew his crossbow without conscious thought. But the sensation of hundreds of tiny spiders running up his spine didn’t abate.

“The miners,” said Arathane. “Cut them down!”

The peacemakers entered the structure.

“Careful!” said Demascus. “We’re probably being watched.” His eyes glittered. He casually spun his swords as he studied the corners of the room. Chant took a half step back in case one of rune blades got away from the deva.

“I don’t see anyone,” countered Riltana, though she’d adopted a slinking, catlike posture, ready to bolt. Chant didn’t blame her. He wished he was back in the skiff sharing biscuits. But he didn’t want to appear scared in front of his son. A stupid reaction, he knew, but there it was.

Arathane’s bodyguards cut down several web masses without drawing any response from hidden observers. Chant realized he was clenching his teeth. He opened and closed his mouth several times, massaging his jaw.

“Should we help?” asked Jaul.

“Yeah. Let’s see if we can do anything for these folks,” said Chant. He squatted down next to one of the cocoons. He set aside his crossbow and swallowed. He really, really didn’t want to touch it but … Jaul passed him one of his red knives, and Chant cut at the webbing. The body proved to be … far past saving. He couldn’t tell if it was a man or woman, only that the body had been sucked dry as a mummy’s husk. A faint smell, like lavender and musk, curled up from the corpse. Chant’s stomach heaved. He stood up suddenly and turned away.

“Nope,” said Jaul, taking his knife back. “No helping him.” The young man scratched his chin and looked around at the other cocoons.

The pawnbroker frowned at his son’s lack of reaction. It was a body—they were surrounded by dead people—killed by some kind of web-spinning horror. Didn’t he understand the same thing could happen to them?

“We need to see what’s down in the mine,” Demascus said. He looked at Arathane. She nodded.

Oh great, thought Chant. Wasn’t this evidence enough that hurling an army at Tymanther’s capital of Djerad Thymar would be exactly the wrong move?

“I’m guessing freakishly large spiders,” Riltana said. “Fist! I *hate* spiders!”

Arathane directed one peacemaker to finish cutting down the corpses. The remaining bodyguard took up position a pace behind the queen.

“Which one should we try first?” said Riltana. She pointed to three distinct mine heads poking up from the depot floor. Each was an elevator shaft terminus and was surmounted by a big iron wheel around which wound slender but presumably strong cord. Chant imagined each cord was attached to a platform that could be raised or lowered to deep levels of the mine. He noticed Jaul casually walking past each shaft terminus in turn, nodding as he examined the mechanisms.

“Arathane?” said Demascus.

The queen shook her head. “I never came farther than—”

“I bet I know which one we should try first,” said Jaul. The bodyguard stiffened at the queen being interrupted, but Arathane didn’t seem to notice.

“You do?” Chant blurted.

“Sure,” said Jaul. He returned to the first wheel and said, “This one.”

“Why that one?” said Demascus.

“See those?” He gestured to a long parchment attached to a post, filled with scribbled notes. Each mine head contained a similar posting. “Maintenance logs. If miners kept good accounts on each shaft, the log will tell us how much maintenance each elevator had. The more they’re used, the more strain on the wheel, the more danger to the miners, and so on. Which means the one with the most grease on the wheels, the least rust on the lines, and so on, got the most maintenance, and probably was used most.”

Chant blinked. How did Jaul know that? His son usually wasn’t one for brilliant displays of logic. On the other hand, the habit of thinking things through was something the pawnbroker had always worked to instill in his son.

Jaul pointed. “And this one gets three times as much maintenance as the other two.”

“All of which means …?” said Riltana

“That this shaft leads to the richest seam of arambarium, probably.” A smug smile lit his face. “So anyone trying to steal the mineral would—”

“Infiltrate the portion of the mine where it was most concentrated. The part of the mine served by that elevator,” finished Demascus.

Chant nodded. That actually … made sense. Pride filled him. He’d secretly been afraid that Jaul’s only aspiration was to serve as thug under Master Raneger. But the boy obviously had a mind of his own, and a sharp one at that.

Which meant, eventually, he'd see that Ranenger wasn't someone worthy of admiration.

"Assuming, of course, the drow are as smart as you," said Riltana. "And aren't somewhere below pursuing dust in a played-out seam."

"The drow have been here more than long enough to discover the richest vein," said Arathane. "We'll try the one Jaul suggested first."

They all crowded around the wheel, the dark cord of which dangled into darkness. Three levers protruded from an iron box mounted next to the wheel. The middle one was probably a brake. So the other two …

"Where's the platform?" said Riltana.

Chant pulled a lever before anyone could tell him not to. Something clunked; probably a counterweight shifting. The wheel lurched into motion. It gradually wound more and more of its dangling cord onto its spool, creaking and squealing in protest.

"It needs more grease," said Demascus.

The platform emerged into the light, still some way below the lip of the shaft. It was an iron-reinforced square of hardwood, complete with railing, suspended from each corner. Three creatures slouched along the platform's railing. They were white-haired elves with skin the color of coal from the waist up. But their legs and lower bodies were giant spiders!

"Fist!" cursed Riltana, stumbling back from the shaft lip.

Chant recognized them from the bestiary in his pawnshop. "Driders!"

The largest of the three spit something into the air—

everything went black. Chant couldn't move his hands or feet. Sounds were muffled. And when he felt himself falling, something sticky held his mouth closed! He came down hard on something. It knocked the breath out of him, but at least the immediate impact meant he wasn't plummeting down the shaft.

“Pa!” He recognized Jaul’s shout.

“Hey, watch it!” yelled Riltana.

“They’re coming!” came an unfamiliar voice. The bodyguard?

Sharkbite! Chant realized what his problem was—he’d been webbed by the damn drider. He had to get free! He thrashed for all he was worth, as screams, clangs, and the sound of metal through flesh whirred around him.

A buzzing, accented voice spoke. “Leave the primordial mother lode to us, and we’ll vanish again and trouble your upworld existence no further. Continue to disturb us, and Lolth shall send her swarming, many-legged assassins to your bedchambers.”

A resonant snap echoed across the depot, followed by the sound of a wheel whirring faster and faster. Several long moments passed, then a tremendous crash, attenuated as if the sound had traveled far. Perhaps as far as the bottom of a lift shaft? Someone must have cut the cord holding the platform!

Someone asked Chant, “You all right?”

Was that Riltana’s voice? Something cold pressed against the side of his face. He flinched.

“Easy, I’m cutting you loose. Don’t jump, leech-son, or you’ll lose an ear.”

Definitely Riltana.

A moment later, he was mostly free of the entangling strands, and he rubbed his hands and eyes. As he’d guessed, the ascending wheel spun freely, with no cord. Demascus stood next to the mechanism with his swords in hand. The driders had been dropped to the bottom of the shaft, hopefully to their collective deaths.

Chant cleared his throat. “Any way to seal this shaft? If those driders aren’t dead, they’ll just climb back up the sides—they’re spiders.”

Jaul took four steps over to a lever with a red handle. “I bet this releases the capstone,” he said, and yanked it. A minor

tremor shook the floor. A hollow boom preceded a billowing cloud of rock dust up the shaft. Jaul coughed and nodded. “It’d take an excavation team a day to clear that rubble.”

“Nice work,” the queen told Jaul. She peeled webbing from her torso with a free hand. Her other arm was webbed to her side.

Jaul beamed. Chant looked around. Demascus and Riltana were web free. And the bodyguard … was simply gone.

“You’ve got your proof, Your Highness,” said Riltana. “This is a drow incursion. We should head back to Airspur, tell the Four Stewards the real deal, and do whatever a monarch does when dark elves are discovered sneaking around her queendom. Oh yeah, and write that letter on my behalf to your favorite niece …”

The queen nodded thoughtfully, but not in agreement. “What did those creatures mean about finding the mother lode? The ‘primordial’ mother lode?”

“Simple enough,” said Chant. “They’re after the largest, oldest concentration of arambarium. If you let them remove it, they’ll leave Akanûl for good.”

“For good,” said the queen, stretching the last word out. “Are drow known for dealing in truth?”

The pawnbroker shrugged. “Well, what? You want to go down after them? Driders are nothing to mess around with—they’re champions of the race. The dark elves think driders are manifestations of Lolth’s will! If a drider threatens you in Lolth’s name, you better pay attention.”

“I recall these creatures,” said Demascus. “And from what I can remember … driders answer to drow priestesses. The ones we just encountered are probably on Chenraya Xorlarrin’s leash, not Lolth’s.”

Chant opened his mouth to tell the deva he was an idiot to consider anything but heading back to the *Green Siren*, but paused when the queen’s hand went up.

“I’m not willing to cede the realm’s largest concentration of arambarium to drow looters. Nor are we powerless to stop

them.” She snapped her fingers. An answering peal of thunder shook the mine depot’s roof. Demascus grinned in delight.

Chant shook his head. Yep. Idiots. “But the shaft down to the deposit is destroyed, thanks to Jaul.”

“Well …” said Jaul. “We could go down one of these secondary shafts. Then make our way through side tunnels to the main face. It’d take longer, but we’d get there eventually.”

His son was too smart for his own good. “When did you become such an expert on mines?” demanded Chant.

Jaul shrugged. “You’re not the only one who likes to read, Pa.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ITHIMIR ISLE

20 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

CHENRAYA XORLARRIN TOUCHED THE DAGGER TIP TO THE whimpering genasi's chest. He was one of the few miners still alive. The torture hadn't managed to kill him like the others. She'd thought his mind was shattered, but by the way he jerked against the bonds he'd apparently retained enough sense of self-preservation to realize what was in store for him. The culmination of the ritual she'd been murmuring and chanting the last half hour approached. His eyes sought hers above the muffling gag, wide with appeal. As if that would sway her not to sacrifice him.

The imbecile's soul would be consumed by Lolth. He should be grateful. How many creatures on or beneath Toril could claim such exaltation? The priestesses of House Xorlarrin had been commanded by Matron Mother Zeerith to avoid any communion with Lolth during the next half year. Zeerith, who was rumored to be profaning her body by lying down with a *man*, had the right to make such a request as Matron Mother of the house. Just as Chenraya had the right to ignore it.

It was time to inform Lolth that House Xorlarrin was about to grant the goddess a wonderful boon, and more important, that Chenraya was responsible. Lolth wanted her daughters to gather certain things: blueflame items, the remains of powerful wizards once precious to Mystra, and relics of immense power. It was the latter that Chenraya was about to gain for Lolth. But if allowed, Matron Mother Zeerith would claim the glory for herself. Chenraya's station wouldn't advance the width of a spider's shadow. It was a gamble.

Lolth *could* choose to punish Chenraya for impudence in attempting direct contact. The possibility was real. Chenraya could be transformed into a mindless servitor, a brute drider, or some other humiliating creature.

But the Spider Queen sometimes rewarded initiative among her followers. And of all the drow scurrying across Faerûn to find the elements or to retake the surface lands Lolth desired, Chenraya judged herself closest to succeeding. She'd finally uncovered the relic!

Chenraya pushed harder on the dagger and chanted the last words of the ritual. The skin of the sacrifice dimpled, then split. Blood welled in the wound, glowing with the power of her arcane working. She drew the dagger up toward the ceiling, and a line of blood followed, more like a web than fluid. She pulled the dagger through the air in a clockwise motion, creating a circle of glowing blood in empty space. When she completed the design, she uttered the final word of her spell and plunged the dagger straight through the sacrifice's heart. His last sound was a gurgle. The man's soul energized the annulus. Through it, Chenraya could see a misty expanse and something huge and black. Perhaps a spider the size of a small village? Communion was imminent!

Chenraya realized her mouth was so dry she couldn't wet her lips. She was more nervous then she'd admitted to herself. She cleared her throat, then said in a hoarse voice, addressing the floating portal, "Lolth, Spider Queen and Queen of the Demonweb Pits, I—"

"WHO?" A voice thundered into Chenraya's consciousness. It battered aside her defenses, all her layers of ego and experience, and raked her naked soul. It was the Demon Queen Lolth, or actually, the priestess understood, a splinter of the Spider Queen's divine attention. Chenraya tried and failed again and again to formulate an answer. Chenraya realized she might have just made her very last mistake.

Lord Pashra swept into the cave. His huge frame threw a shadow across the limp body on the altar and across the floating annulus hung in midair. The moment the oni's shadow bisected the floating circle, it collapsed into a splatter of blood across the dead genasi's chest. The overwhelming presence pinning Chenraya's mind like a moth on a placard whispered away in the same instant.

The priestess slumped, catching herself on the edge of the altar.

"Chenraya!" said Pashra. "They're here! On the island!"

"Who … who's here?" What was the oni talking about? She was having difficulty focusing. Her mind felt as if it'd barely withstood the impact of a sledgehammer. It hadn't shattered, but tiny cracks splintered all through it.

"Who do you think? The spies who found us at the warehouse, who ventured into the Demonweb. The white-haired man, the windsoul, and a few others. They threw our greeting force back down the main shaft and sealed it! Only one drider survived the fall.

What should we do?"

The image of the pale-haired man with tattoos the color of gray clouds gave her something to focus on. That one was dangerous. Something about him raised the hairs on her neck like flexing spider legs …

She pushed away from the altar and straightened. Pashra's intrusion would normally have thrown her into a rage. However, given that the oni's interruption had probably saved her from the direct attention of a vengeful goddess, Chenraya decided to defer punishment for a later date. For now …

"I'll prepare an ambush with the full force of my harem and slaves," she said. "You see about unsealing the main shaft. It's time for you to carry your weight in this partnership."

The oni frowned. "Without me, you'd never have known the relic existed, let alone its location."

She shrugged. “That’s in the past; we’re in the present, dear Pashra. See that you clear our exit. I’ll make certain our troublesome guests find the end they so obviously crave. If my slave-soldiers and harem can’t eliminate them, half the weight of a collapsing island falling on them will.”

Pashra growled but kept his thoughts to himself as he departed.

Chenraya stood in the silence of her cave for a moment, looking at the failed results of her ritual. Then she made a fist and slammed it down on the immobile body.

“All for nothing!” she screamed. If retrieving the relic hidden in this clot of alien landscape wasn’t enough to garner Lolth’s favor, what would be? The priestess smashed the corpse one more time for good measure, then turned to leave.

That’s when she heard a tiny voice in her head. So small at first she thought she imagined it. But when the meaning finally penetrated, fear as cold as the wind off the great glacier chilled her blood.

“I’m watching you, daughter. Do not disappoint.”



Riltana hated being underground. The air was lifeless. It barely stirred itself to her desire, and even then, only with dragging petulance. It smelled faintly of sulfur and … urine? Was that even possible? Probably—who knew how many excavators had been here, relieving themselves in dark corners. Her nose wrinkled. Mine air was bad air, through and through. The stone walls were chipped and ridged with the cuts of picks, shovels, and magical blasts. Every so often they came across a hair-wide seam of silvery mineral. Queen Arathane said it was low-grade arambarium, not worth digging out when higher-grade ore was more easily extractable in other places. Wood spars at irregular intervals marked their progress. Except they’d been down here for

what felt like hours already. She'd lost track of time and spars.

"How far now?" she asked.

Demascus shrugged as if he didn't have a care in the world. Right; she knew better. Well, she hoped she knew better.

Jaul's head was bent over a sheaf of parchment in his hands, where he was sketching tunnels on a crude map. "We're close," he said.

"You said that an hour ago."

"This time, we are."

She sighed and bottled up an acid comeback. Probably not the time to risk precipitating violence. The queen already didn't think the windsoul was a good friend for her niece. Riltana didn't want to add fuel to that fire by acting out *too* much. Arathane likely wouldn't go back on her promise to intercede on Riltana's behalf, but why be needlessly stupid?

Instead Riltana rubbed her palms together and pictured a small yellow sphere. The Prisoner's Stone fell out of glovespace into her hand. She rolled it between her fingers. Its slight weight was reassuring. If worse came to worst, it might allow her to get out of the mine. Its power to break bonds of every other sort had always functioned when she needed it. Though she wasn't quite sure how the magic worked. Would the stone's power to break artificial bonds of imprisonment allow her to squirm free from tons of entombing rock, too? Her stomach churned at the thought.

A click-click sound made her pause.

"Does anyone else hear that?" she said. She squeezed the Prisoner's Stone back into glovespace.

"Shhh," hissed Demascus, his head cocked. He'd heard it, too. The clicking sound continued, occasionally breaking off for several long moments before resuming. It came from the tunnel ahead. It might be the sound of two rocks knocking together … or two mandibles! It was too faint to be sure.

Jaul’s eyes locked on hers—wide with alarm but also with triumph. He’d led them to something, at least. Demascus took the lead, motioning for everyone else to follow. The light of Chant’s sunrod slid off the deva like water, as if he was already transitioning into a halfshadow state. Riltana followed, but not too close, in case the deva fully woke his power. She worried he’d accidentally kill her one day while he was enveloped in the vestige of what he’d once been.

The tunnel descended in a series of tight switchbacks dropping them a hundred or more yards before opening into an enormous cavern lit with a hovering pillar of purple flame. Splintered planks from an elevator lay scattered across the stone floor. Tether cord was splayed in hundred-yard loops across the room like spilled blood. Riltana realized it must be the platform Demascus had cut loose. She sucked in a breath. The driders had come up from this chamber! Where were they now?

A few dozen cocoons swayed on lines descending from the ceiling. She spied no spiders, no dark elves, no driders. She didn’t feel any relief. If their foes weren’t here, where were they?

The floor was a checkerboard of vertical lifts and drops, each level a random distance above or below its neighbor. Narrow planks connected some of the surfaces above dark crevices. Other level areas were isolated miniature mesas. Webs clogged many of the pits.

Jaul pointed straight across the cavern. “The mine face is the far wall,” he whispered, remaining quiet, it seemed, more out of awe than stealth.

Riltana squinted. The purple illumination made visibility tricky, but she made out a shape curling out of the rock. Half was free of entombment, apparently thanks to the careful work of picks and chisels. It glowed silver even in the bluish-red light.

“The arambarium mother lode?” she asked.

Arathane studied the object for a few moments. “It must be,” she finally replied.

“It’s big as a house,” said Chant. “And it looks like … Wait. That can’t be right.”

“What can’t be?” said Jaul.

“The chunk of mineral. Does it look like … a disembodied hand to you?”

asked Chant.

“Lords of shadow!” exclaimed Demascus.

Riltana agreed. The damn thing *was* a hand, ten feet across if it was an inch. Surely it was part of a sculpture. A piece of some really old statue. Unless it was the lopped-off limb of some ancient god or primordial …

The clicking resumed as a procession entered the vault, emerging from behind a fold of rock in the opposite corner of the cavern. The first few creatures resembled a cross between gangly humans and bloated spiders. They had long, slender arms and legs protruding from rounded, fleshy bodies. Bulbous black eyes blinked from their spider heads.

Riltana ducked behind a knob of basalt. Her companions scurried to follow her lead.

“More spider hybrids,” hissed Demascus.

“Ettercaps,” replied Chant softly. “They’re ettercaps.”

Riltana didn’t give a flying piss whether they were called ettercaps or bumbledorks. Either way, they were bad news.

The creatures pulled a sledge into view. Instead of runners, the transport slid on air itself. Three creatures rode on the sledge: a drider, a blue ogre with horns, and an ebony-skinned woman with hair like spun ice and an outfit composed of equal parts armor and bared skin. Though Riltana had never seen one before, she knew the woman was a drow.

“Oh, shit,” she breathed. The tinkle of a silly child’s rhyme started up unbidden in her head, in time to the clicking, about fat spiders and playing hide and seek in the trees….

“The drider greeters told you to leave,” the drow said, facing their direction. She didn’t yell, but her voice carried across the irregular chamber with perfect resonance.

“She knows we’re here!” whispered Jaul. Chant shushed him.

“But you didn’t listen,” the drow continued. “So you’ve made your choice.”

Demascus sighed. He straightened and stepped forward several paces, up a plank and out onto one of the mesa-like platforms.

“You’re Chenraya Xorlarrin, with whom Master Raneger made an alliance?” the deva said, his voice loud enough to carry. Lord Pashra and the drider tensed, but the drow murmured something to them Riltana couldn’t hear.

“You’ve followed us far,” she said, her voice again as audible as if she were standing next to them. “Even onto the Demonweb. Very rash. Lolth knows your scent.”

Demascus waved his hand as if the drow’s words were irrelevant. “So Raneger remains your ally?”

She laughed. “Of course not! No priestess of Lolth would long pollute herself pretending to treat another as an equal. Especially that overinflated worm.” She sniffed. “But the fool Raneger served his purpose. If not for the blind of his warehouse, I might’ve learned too late that someone else had discovered my interest in this ridiculous country.”

Queen Arathane broke cover and joined Demascus. Her bodyguard hustled to follow her.

“You’ve made your last mistake, Mistress Xorlarrin,” announced Arathane. “I rule this ‘ridiculous country,’ as you name it. I’m more than capable of ending your threat to Akanûl’s sovereignty.”

Chenraya was too far away for Riltana to make out any expression on the dark elf’s face, but her momentary stillness spoke volumes. The drow was surprised, perhaps even suddenly afraid to find the monarch of Akanûl was there. Some of the tension that had been building in the

windsoul’s jaws and throat eased. Not that she was yet ready to stand up and expose her position; she remained huddled behind cover with Chant and Jaul.

Finally Chenraya said, “I don’t doubt you are strong. But I’m under Lolth’s protection. The Demon Queen gave each of her daughters—all the drow, in fact, even the sniveling husbands and sons of the drow—a challenge. Mine is to recover this piece of ejecta from the forgotten twin of Toril, for Lolth’s coming transformation. You’ll not stop me.”

Chant whispered, “Arathane’s got the drow talking—we should attack while she’s distracted. Or better yet, run.”

“Shhh. I want to hear what she’s saying,” Riltana said. She was no intellectual, but if Lolth was mobilizing the drow for some sinister scheme, it probably wasn’t a bad idea to find out why.

Chant sighed, but lapsed back into silence.

The dark elf was still speaking, “… this relic limb of the dead primordial Arambar, slain in the ancient wars before Abeir-Toril became two. I have as much right to it as anyone. Indeed, I found the mother lode first, despite all your feeble scratching in the earth to collect its residue. It’s mine.”

Arathane shook her head. “Whether it’s a mineral deposit or a relic of some long dead creature, it’s the property of Akanûl—we’ve claimed this isle for decades, and have worked the stone, extracting its resources. And regardless, you’ve slain my people who labored here under my protection. There’s no scenario under which you’ll leave this place alive and unpunished.”

“So much for the diplomatic option,” Chant murmured.

“Then come stop me, genasi,” purred Chenraya. The drow and her party stepped off the sledge. She glanced at the cluster of ettercaps. “Remove the Hand of Arambar from the stone and secure it.”

Demascus glanced at Arathane and her remaining bodyguard, then back at Riltana and the others. His slow

grin of excitement spoke volumes. The idiot was eager to fight.

Dozens more ettercaps crawled up from web-clogged pits scattered across the vault floor. They were accompanied by spiders of every size, including one as large as a half-grown dragon. The cocoons hanging from the ceiling jerked and writhed, then disgorged bloated mine workers like hatching insects. The miners dropped to the stone floor. Only about half staggered back to their feet. Then the undead corpses, the spiders, and the newly revealed ettercaps surged across the vault toward the queen's party.

"Too many!" Riltana yelled. She leaped into the air, trusting that it would catch her. It did, and she soared higher on wings of wind. "How'd they all get out here to the island?"

"The Demonweb?" asked Chant. He brought up his crossbow and began firing.

"Jaul, stay behind me!" Riltana's retort was lost in the attacking throng's scream. Like an advancing army, the creatures squealed battle cries with hard mandibles and dead lips.

From her floating vantage, the thief saw the first wave of spiders pour onto the platform where Demascus and the queen stood. The deva's twin swords moved in a complicated hourglass pattern, creating an alternating red and white glow that burned the smallest spiders to cinders and dazed the ettercaps and corpses, making them stumble and sway when they came into its light.

The queen whirled her spear over her head, then plunged it into an ettercap that had slipped around the sword of her bodyguard. The creature lit up from the inside, lightning-bright, then disappeared with a ripping pop.

Something sticky brushed Riltana's face, and she wiped it quickly away. Gore? No—an ettercap was trying to lasso her with a web line! A veritable blizzard of webs sleeted the air toward her. She swallowed a curse and dropped beneath the

canopy of lofting nets, coming too close to the irregular ground for her comfort. Chant shouted something, but Riltana couldn't make it out over the din. She skimmed only a few feet above the swarming attackers.

A genasi corpse with clear fluid sopping his shirt saw her. It tried to bash her head in with a broken pickaxe. Riltana bobbed under the blow, caught his arm, and broke it with a rising knee. The corpse staggered back too far and dropped off the platform into one of the surrounding pits.

Demascus, the queen, and her swearing bodyguard advanced along a plank to another stony rise, closer to Chenraya. Riltana snarled and flung herself once more into an updraft she coaxed into being with—

Something grabbed one of her rising boots.

"Get off me, you leech-son!" she snarled, and kicked at the ettercap trying to pull her back down. For its trouble, the thing got a steel-toed kick to the crown of its head. It made a sighing noise as it dropped back into the press of spiders. The windsoul used the momentum of her blow to whirl back above the fray. A cresting wave of spiders rolled toward Demascus and Arathane.

The lone drider that had been on the far side of the vault appeared between the deva and the queen in a shadowy blast tinged with purple light. The queen's elite bodyguard yelled, pressing the drider with a flurry of attacks. The drider drew back before the peacemaker's glinting sword … until one of the drider's coal-dark legs slashed down and cut him from neck to navel with a clawed tip.

Arathane fended off another clawed leg with her spear.

Riltana realized Demascus was plastered in webbing.

"Half-wit deva!" she cursed.

The thief arrowed downward at an angle, holding her sword like a spike. She plunged it into the bulbous thorax of the drider even as it reared up over Demascus.

It screeched. Its legs convulsed. One knocked the queen over the crumbling edge, more by accident than design.

Another struck Riltana, smashing her out of the air. She rolled a few times along the stone in the opposite direction, gathering bruises, and dropped her sword in glovespace just in time to free her hands. She clung to the powdery lip of the mesa. The pit beneath her crawled with spiders on sticky webs—she did *not* want to fall down there.

Riltana contracted her arms and kicked high. She got a boot heel over the edge, and pulled herself up. The drider had jumped to a neighboring platform. In its free human hand, it gathered a ball of purplish black light.

“Demascus!” she yelled. Where’d he go? The webs that caught him fluttered, but he was no longer visible. Had he been knocked into one of the pits?

Arathane hurled her spear at the drider. It became a jagged streak of light in midflight and played across the drider’s form like lightning prodding a prairie. When the crackling radiance died away, the drider swayed, leaking ichor from several char spots on its skin and exoskeleton. The spear appeared back in Arathane’s hand with the sound of distant thunder.

The drider was hurt but not finished. It raised high the vile mass of light still squirming in its hand and screamed, “Lolth, I summon thee.”

“Oh, fist!” said Riltana. Was it really calling a demon goddess? “Lolth, turn your visage upon this—”

A shadow swept across the drider, moving so swiftly that Riltana could barely track it. Where it passed, a line of fresh ichor gushed. When it stopped next to the massive bulk of the drider, she saw it was Demascus, cloaked in gloom. His weapons blazed out of the dimness, casting just enough light across his face for Riltana to recognize the cruel, gleeful lines of the Sword of the Gods. A line of greenish fluid trailed from a perfect cut across the drider’s neck. Its incantation was ruined. Good! But … goose bumps speckled her arms.

Demascus gestured as if casting an invisible shroud across the drider's bulk, even as the spider-thing whirled to get a glimpse of its attacker. Before it had completely turned, Demascus charged, and with a dual, scissors-like swing, decapitated the dark elf torso from the spider body. The drider fell in two parts, dead.

"Good job, Demascus!" Riltana yelled. She came down next to him. Her boot heels rang on the stone.

The deva glanced at her. His scarf had come loose in the fight and hovered around him like a cobra's hood, lending him a more dramatic air of menace than usual. His blank eyes were holes in shadow. She stepped back without realizing it.

Demascus fixed his eyes across the chamber. The original ettercaps who'd pulled the sledge into the chamber had taken up picks and hammers and were excavating the hand. Chenraya and Lord Pashra seemed content to monitor the dig.

It struck Riltana as slightly odd that they hadn't reacted with alarm when the drider had fallen. In fact, it almost seemed to her that a big blue smirk hovered at the edges of Pashra's lips. The drow was too far away to make out her expression. But her posture suggested she was waiting for something.

Demascus laughed and stepped into shadow. He stepped out twenty paces farther into the room, bypassing a good portion of Chenraya's massed might.

"Demascus, wait!" she yelled.

The deva found another door through obscurity. He reappeared dozens of yards farther into the vault. He'd spanned about three-fourths of the distance to the mine face, where ettercaps dug at the entombed hand like ferrets drunk on glitter weed.

Chenraya smiled. It must've been a wide smile for Riltana to notice it from so far.

Oh shit!, she thought. "Demascus, get—"

The ceiling fell. Tons of stone simply dropped. It smothered the center of the vault. Riltana’s last glimpse of Demascus was his raised arms, as if he had a hope in heaven of protecting himself from the rock fall. Then the stone ground him down, and an explosive plume of rock dust covered everything like a shroud.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Somewhere in the Astral Sea

A Long Time Ago

The peak shivered beneath a sky of endless silver.

The mountain was a divine domain, an island of tranquility adrift in the Astral Sea. A god's benevolence suffused each new day with peace. Or once had. Trouble had come to this particular paradise. A devilish entity determined to claim godhood for itself assaulted it.

The summit shuddered as if waking from sleep. It groaned as if finally letting go of a burden carried for too many years. Then the mountain roared in full-throated agony. As a wave breaks, the pinnacle broke, and an avalanche of snow and stone splashed downward, enrobing the mountain in a lengthening garment of roiling mist.

Not nearly far enough down that slope, Demascus fought. Golden light leaked from the Whorl of Ioun on Demascus's left thumb. *Exorcessum* flashed in his grip. The Veil wrapped his left forearm, and a dozen god-given charms dangled from his braided hair. He was the Sword of the Gods. His role was to terminate those who had been selected by gods and fate to die.

However, that day his burden was not to slay; it was to save.

Demascus stood beneath the lintel of a silver gate that opened into the mountain's heart. The gate trembled with the domain's turmoil. But while he stood in its mouth, the gate could not collapse. The arch-shaped charm he wore in his hair prevented it. The gate had already suffered a dozen voracious assaults from lesser cataclysm dragons roused by

devilish pacts. And he had broken each new attack on the length of his blade.

Terrified souls streamed from the gate's mouth. Dressed in sheer robes of white and gold, and having spent uncounted years in the warm embrace of their divine benefactor, they were unprepared for cataclysm. Yet they grasped at even the smallest chance for survival. Demascus was providing that opportunity. As the refugees reached the gate, they were pulled up into the sky by servitor angels and ferried away like a cloud of dandelion seeds in the wind. Most would escape. But only if Demascus proved his worth.

A louder roar pierced all the others. The deva's eyes rose to the tumbling line high above. The distant avalanche was approaching with alarming speed, for it contained another cataclysm dragon—on an order of magnitude more dangerous than those he'd so far reduced to rubble. It writhed within the mountainside on the move, a part of the greater disaster surrounding it. Its wings were the vanguard of pounding stone, its voice the bellow of suffocating rock, and its lashing tail the enveloping pall of dust that would eventually settle on the defeated. Draconic only in broad outline, it was an animate collection of jagged stone, snow, and packed ash. The dragon's eyes, fangs, and claws were diamond crystals, flashing with static discharge.

"Lords of light and shadow!" said Demascus. Even for one such as him, who had seen so much, this enemy was something unique. Despite the fact that he stood half in light and half in shadow, completely wrapped in his power, the deva knew a moment of disquiet. The creature was more than cataclysm—it was final apocalypse. The Veil of Wrath and Knowledge revealed its name: Nebiru the Falling Star. The Whorl of Ioun provided the rest in windings of quick recollection. Nebiru was an apocalypse dragon—a catastrophic wyrm who'd lived too long and grown too powerful.

Somehow Nebiru had been persuaded to leave its lair of lightless hollows that composed creation's debris. Which meant that no matter what he did, Demascus was fated to lose this fight. And the god whose subjects the deva was charged to protect … were as good as dead.

"Whorl of Ioun," he said. "Remember." The ring on his finger became like ice as it pulled in fragments of moods, scenes, and, most important, abilities that Demascus had unlocked in his latest incarnation. It was an imperfect vessel of all his previous selves. Nearly half of his personal memories were lost in each transfer. But the rest survived. The ring was the bridge to becoming himself again.

"Exorcessum, find me when I fall so we're reunited again in a future far from here." Though he didn't have to command his sword—his implements would find him again regardless—he had flashes of recollection of other objects that had occasionally turned up every few incarnations: a silver belt, a cape of shade, and sometimes a dull metal strongbox with a relief of skulls and flower petals. Those hadn't appeared this time. Why? Impossible to know. Just like he didn't know how, or even remember *who* had first given him his panoply of weapons and items, or why he'd been selected to receive them. They were simply part of him. They came with his office: Sword of the Gods.

The runes of his blade glimmered as the avalanche of the apocalypse above thundered closer. Each time he took a divine commission, the runes were renewed. Which was convenient—at least, it would be to the version of himself that would next wield Exorcessum.

The evacuation was half complete when Nebiru fell on Demascus. He accepted his lot—his task had been to try, not to succeed. The refugees exiting the silver gate screamed as they, their angel porters, and Demascus their protector were covered in a mountain's worth of glacier, crushed rock, and ash exhaled from the maw of an apocalypse dragon.

Demascus opened his eyes on darkness. Images of animate stone and sliding snow chased around his mind like maddened gnats. Without connection, without context, and without any clear relationship to anything, the images accumulated and drifted across his consciousness …

He coughed up grit. He tried to spit, but his mouth was too dry. Why was it so dark? He shook his head to clear his brain fog. Where was he? More important, when and who was he? He remembered fighting a drow matron and … an unbeatable end-of-days dragon. Both had dropped a death-dealing amount of rock on his head. But … which one was most recent? In which incarnation was he? His heart thudded as he wrestled with the fear of being unmoored from himself. He couldn't see anything. Something pinned his legs. The air was thick, not just with dust, and each breath felt like a foot on his chest. It was going bad, he realized. If he didn't escape, it would be academic which incarnation he was …

The fact that he was still alive told him a great deal, actually. And the nature of the stone around him was revealing; it wasn't rearing up, animate and hungry to smother him. Which argued that his memory of the mountaintop was a fragment recollection only. Memories of Akanûl unfolded in his mind's eye. Chant, Riltana, the city of Airpsur and its stormy queen … Yes. He sighed in relief, then coughed. No wonder he was confused; Chenraya had dropped a cavern roof on him! His subconscious had matched it up with an earlier incarnation's similar experience. He pushed away the unwanted memories of trying to save flashing, angelic beings blowing into a silver sky. It wasn't him. It happened a long time ago. Just a dusty recollection. And one where he'd died in a rock fall.

That's not going to happen here, he thought. I'm going to live.

He tried to move his legs again. Nothing doing. Merciful lords, *please* don't let that be what happens here. Demascus

concentrated on his heartbeat. Still too fast, but it was proof that life still clung to this shell. And he wasn't helpless. Far from it. And …

"Veil of Wrath and Knowledge," he said, his voice cracking with thirst. "Are you with me?" A glimmer ran through the threads of fabric wrapped around his left forearm. "More," he urged it. The wrap brightened like a turned-up lamp wick, until golden light spilled across Demascus.

He was in a cramped space. The ceiling was a mass of boulders. They were lodged against a massive stalagmite that'd fallen next to him. The entire cavity was probably only five feet in diameter, and half that tall. One of *Exorcessum's* hilts was just visible, protruding from a drift of gravel, just beyond his reach. And …

His legs were caught under the same stalagmite that had partially shielded him. But he had light. Which meant even the shadow of his own reaching hand could serve him.

He slipped into the crack of dimness the shadow offered. Quick as blinking and he'd shifted a half pace. His legs were free! But he still couldn't feel them. He thrashed, and they moved. He bent down in the cramped space and slapped his thighs, hard. He imagined curling and uncurling his toes. A faint tingle came first, which heralded the onslaught of tiny daggers. He smiled, not minding the pain. It meant his legs had only gone to sleep under the weight of the fall, not been crushed to pulp.

"Now … lords of shadow, how am I going to get out of here?" He pulled himself over uneven rubble, staying clear of an ettercap's splayed arm. The greater part of the creature's body was beneath an oblong boulder. He didn't feel sorry for it. He might soon be joining the thing. At least it had died quickly, probably instantly. He might linger for hours, gasping at the bad air, until he passed on.

Demascus assumed Chenraya had stayed well clear of the collapse. If she triggered it, then she'd undoubtedly done so only to trap him. She'd known they were coming, or that

someone like them would investigate. More important—was he close enough to the edge of the fall to dig himself free? He couldn’t use shadow to escape; he had to see where he was going to travel between discontinuities of light. His bubble of stale air was completely sheathed in stone.

He probed the boulders making up the boundary of his confinement, looking for anything promising and hoping the prodding wouldn’t bring the whole thing down. He made a complete circuit of the tiny enclosure but located nothing. Worse, he was having a harder time catching his breath. He was quickly losing air. Better not think about that. Yes, if he died, he’d return in a few years—but everything he’d learned in this life would be gone.

If only he had that ring. The twisted band appeared in so many of his past-life flashes of memory. Apparently the Whorl didn’t contain every detail of his life, but it did hold all the Sword’s powers and skills. Discovering why, of all his implements, the ring had failed to show up this time around was something he should probably figure out. Assuming he lived through the next hour. If he didn’t, he’d start back at square one. The thought was almost physically painful.

He grabbed the single visible hilt of *Exorcessum* and pulled it from the grit. It was the blade with white runes. The runes brightened and lifted slightly from the blade, save for the two that remained dark. Knowledge of where the other blade lay under the detritus seeped into him, becoming a certainty when he dug with his free hand and found the red-runed blade’s hilt. He pulled it free. Demascus crossed the two blades before him so they lightly touched. Then he gazed at each rune in turn on both blades, hoping to understand their significance. A few came clear to him like blurry memories of childhood haunts—the runes of the red blade were chilly spells of sharp death to foes. The remaining white runes were mostly concerned with relieving various hurts of body and soul. None were capable of

relieving him of the condition of asphyxiating under a rock fall.

“How about you?” he asked his scarf. The Veil of Wrath and Knowledge retained its ember-like glow. But it did not offer a single word in the threads of its weave. The length of fabric was best used for strangling, not succor.

Strangling … Madri’s final moments swam before him, her eyes wide with hurt betrayal. He hadn’t used the Veil to end her existence, but the Veil’s silent complicity must have urged him onward. The Veil was supposed to give Fate’s sanction to each contract the gods awarded him. Presumably, it had not opposed his previous self when he was contracted to slay Madri … though he had no memory of asking it if Madri was a legitimate target. He couldn’t even recall the crime she’d committed, even though it must have been heinous if a divine being would require her death because of it. Were he put in a similar position in his latest incarnation, would he do it again? Would he, if directed by Oghma or Corellon or some other god of Toril, kill … Arathane?

“No,” he said, and blinked in surprise. He wouldn’t. He knew it with complete certainty. Even if he was caught up in an echo of his former power, he wouldn’t slay a friend. Especially a friend who might one day become something more. But … he’d slain Madri.

And Madri had meant far more to him, his memory fragments hinted, than he could possibly ever hope from a queen of Akanûl. What was different between then and now?

The difference was himself. *He* was changed. It was more than merely a hope. It was the simple truth. After who-knew-how-many lifetimes spent as a vessel of divine revenge, a pitiless enforcer of the gods’ will, had he finally grown a conscience? Yes.

He guessed losing the Whorl of Ioun made that possible. But here he lay, breathing up the last hours of air remaining, on the cusp of losing this life.

Demascus didn’t doubt he’d be reincarnated again, dragged back into bone, flesh, ache, and anxiety, a prisoner on the endless wheel. He’d find himself washed to some new shore, or perhaps his secret mausoleum, several years hence. Probably some subset of his implements would be gathered to him by some ancient congruence he didn’t understand. Perhaps next time around, the golden ring would come back to him, too. And bridge him with all his previous selves, leaving his current existence cut out. The ring wasn’t with him now. It wasn’t able to record even a fraction of his current experience and newfound consciousness. Which meant the “him” thinking these thoughts would be as dead as any mortal being whose memories were ground to dust on eternity’s mill wheel.

Demascus shivered. He wished one of those angels from his unwanted vision would appear. He’d petition it to ferry him to breathable air and a silvery sky. Maybe a former version of him would have even known how to call such an entity. But he was fresh out of recipes for angel bait. His last attempt to contact the divine showed the gods wouldn’t help him, anyway.

With nothing better to do, Demascus toyed with his swords. He scissored the twin blades of *Exorcessum* so they lined up. Then he released his grip on the hilts. He imagined them falling together, fusing, becoming like the sword it had first—

Exorcessum joined into a single blade with a boom that momentarily deafened him. The blade was identical in size to the massive thing it’d once been. An almost ludicrously large broadsword. He smiled. He wondered how many configurations the sword—

“Demascus,” murmured a woman’s voice at his ear.

“Burning dominions!” he swore, jerking in shock. Pain stabbed him where he knocked his knee on a rock.

Madri was there! The low ceiling didn’t allow her to stand; she lay as if reclining, next to him. Her gown was pristine, as

was her hair and skin—unmarred by the grime and dried sweat coating him. Her eyes caught his, and held him motionless for a dozen heartbeats. It took him that long to accept that she was really there with him and not an aberration of his air-starved mind.

Finally he ventured, “You … you’ve come back to haunt me for what I did?”

She raised an eyebrow. *Was* she a ghost? Or something else entirely? She didn’t seem the least bit ethereal. The air hadn’t chilled with her appearance. He decided to proceed as if she was a rational being, not a grave-born revenant.

“I’m sorry. I would never harm you. I … I’m not the same Demascus you knew,” he said. “In fact, I hardly remember you, only a couple of fragments.”

Her brows drew down and her dark eyes flashed. She said in a throaty, completely unghostly voice, “You killed me, you bottom-feeding louse! For a contract. A damn contract with some god—you chose your office over me. And now you don’t even remember who I am?” She slapped him. His face burned with the unexpected contact.

“What are you?” he said.

“Does it matter? It won’t change what you did, you bastard.”

“I suppose not. I do remember … that. But I’m not the person who took that contract.”

“What kind of dragon dung are you trying to shovel, Demascus? You’ve got the same sword, the same scarf, the same face, even the same eyes.”

“I’ve even got a few of the same memories,” he said. He wiped his face. His stomach roiled, and his voice shook. “But I’m a different incarnation. The me who killed you died, too. *I* am not the one who betrayed what you had with … the old me.”

As the words passed his lips, he knew what they sounded like: a particularly lame excuse. Nothing better suggested itself, though. Besides, it was the truth. His words to Madri

were a variation on what he'd been telling himself. If the blame truly was *his*, he wouldn't even try to explain himself. He'd accept her scorn unchallenged.

She laughed. "You're unbelievable. Here you are, with less than a bell's worth of air left before you asphyxiate, and you still won't own up to your crime."

"I know how it looks. I know you can't forgive me. And you probably shouldn't. For what it's worth … I'm sorry. I wouldn't do what he did to you."

"Liar."

He thought she might slap him again. But she closed her eyes as if surrendering to exhaustion.

What had she been up to? Then he remembered how Kasdrian Norjah had accused Madri of taking the Necromancer. He should ask. The question lay on his tongue like a rotten almond. Instead, he said, "Madri … How can you be here? You're dead, maybe a century or more in the grave. I don't understand."

Her posture softened. She opened her eyes. Some of the hate was gone, replaced by a hint of vulnerability. His hand, almost of its own accord, cupped her face. Her cheek was warm. She leaned her head into his palm and murmured, "I've missed you, Demascus."

He considered replying in kind—but he didn't recall enough of their relationship for that to be true. This wasn't the time to start lying, he judged, though her remark screamed for some kind of answer.

Finally she filled the silence. "I don't know for certain how I've returned. You're partly responsible, or your sword. And your enemies. They're waiting for you to make a mistake. Or rather, for prophecies to deliver you into their service …"

"What? What's that supposed to mean?" Demascus tried to pull away, but she clasped his hand. Then she leaned in and kissed him.

The feather warmth of lips transported him. They were like velvet.

He knew her perfume: orange-peach with undertones of cedar. Her scent was a window in his mind. He saw how she'd been, before, as they'd walked the plazas of a faraway place called Halruaa. He'd thrilled at her mastery of a magical metropolis whose architecture equaled divine domains. She'd been a person of importance, someone who'd mattered. And someone who'd taken an interest in him. She was enchanting. He pulled her close. She melted into his arms. She wasn't anything like a ghost. Madri gazed into his eyes as if searching for something.

"I don't know how it's possible you're here, but … do you believe me? Life's too short to spend in revenge."

Madri pulled away. "I don't know, Demascus. Maybe life's too short for regular people. But we're both here, together again. Which means there's always time for retribution. You killed me. I can't forget that. So now I'm going to leave you, even though I could probably save you."

"You can get me out of here?"

"Maybe. But I won't. I'm leaving you to die. As you killed me … I'm killing you. How does it feel?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ITHIMIR ISLE

21 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

AFTER ALL THEY'D GONE THROUGH TOGETHER, CHANT could scarcely believe Demascus was dead.

The awkward isle protruded from the sea, waves washing against it with mindless regularity. The overcast sky painted everything the color of ash. What was it to the Sea of Fallen Stars, a body of water larger than many nations, that a lone deva had died beneath its surface in a mine collapse? Nothing.

Wasn't a deva's death merely a temporary setback? Demascus would return …

Not really, he thought. The person I know is gone. Someone would rise again and take the name Demascus, and probably wield the same implements. He just wouldn't remember anything of what he'd accomplished and the friends he'd made in Akanûl, except as isolated fragments. In a very real sense, the Demascus Chant had called friend was gone forever.

Flakes of paint came away from *Green Siren's* railing and crumbled in his palms. Jaul seemed the only one oblivious to the island and unaffected by the death of Demascus; he alternated juggling his knives and throwing them at a mast when the crew wasn't looking.

Riltana and Queen Arathane were with Chant at the railing, staring at the bleak island. They had spent fruitless hours digging, or trying to dig, but ultimately failing to make real headway, and finally everyone was forced to admit that Demascus was lost beyond recovery beneath the rock fall. After that, escaping the arambarium mine had required

hours, as they traced their way out the same way they'd entered. At least the drow and all her minions had suffered the same fate as the deva, Chant hoped. He noticed that tears had made trails in the grime on the windsoul thief's cheek.

Arathane, though, was still as a statue, majestic and deliberate. It was only the tightness in her neck and the slight quiver of her lip that betrayed her to Chant.

Recognizing the monarch's sorrow finally broke the pawnbroker's own reserve. Moisture gathered in his eyes. He dropped his face to his hands. "Demascus, you were a friend," he whispered. "One of the few I made in this crazy world. Why'd you have to get yourself killed?"

The slap of water against the side of *Green Siren* was his only answer.

"Hey!" came Captain Thoster's voice from aft. "What in Umberlee's name is that?" The captain pointed at the island.

Chant strained to look. Was it Demascus? Had the deva burrowed his way free? At first he didn't understand what he was seeing. A cloud rose from the island summit, like steam off a teakettle. He squinted. No, it wasn't vapor—the cloud was composed of spiders. Hundreds of spiders. Each had deployed some kind of wavering filament. Caught by the wind, the strands pulled the creatures en masse into the sky.

The largest ones held ettercaps and undead miners in their eight-fold grips …

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Pretty obvious," said Riltana. "The drow are evacuating the island."

A larger shape climbed into the leaden air: A balloon spun of spider silk, shaped like a massive arachnid. Hanging beneath it on a forest of thin webs, and serving as the balloon's ballast, was a cocoon the size of a small house. A silver sheen glinted dully through a thin section of the cocoon covering.

“That’s the arambarium mother lode,” said the queen. Her voice was weary with disbelief.

Riltana said, “They didn’t use the Demonweb to reach the island—they flew! Those rat-coddling leech-kissers!”

It took only a span of breaths for the soaring spiders and arachnid blimp to ascend into the cloud ceiling.

“Gone,” said Chant. He was having trouble thinking. The image wanted to push everything else out of his head.

“Will they wing directly over the Sea of Fallen Stars?” said Queen Arathane. “Or take a ship from Airspur? If the latter, we may still catch them.”

“Why would they take a ship when all they have to do is reach the mouth of the Demonweb?” asked Riltana.

The queen gave a curt nod. “Right. We could still conceivably stop them there …”

Arathane’s was staring at a stranger who’d walked up the deck to stand with them. A human woman in green gowns with eyes nearly as tumultuous as the queen’s. Her perfume preceded her: orange rind with a hint of something sharper. Chant wondered if Captain Thoster had other paying charters on his ship.

“I know you,” Arathane said to the woman. “You were outside Demascus’s home. You’re his householder? But that doesn’t make any sense …”

“I told you then I was not his householder. That hasn’t changed.”

“Then who are you?” the queen asked.

“My name is Madri. Listen—time is short,” the woman in green said. “If you want to save your friend, you have a splinter of a chance. But he’ll certainly pass from this life if you fritter away the time with pointless questions.”

“What?” said Chant. “Are you talking about Demascus? He’s alive? Who *are* you?”

“He was alive, but he’s buried in a tiny tomb of fallen stones. His air is going bad. If someone doesn’t get him out in the next hour, he’ll die.”

“You’re the ghost!” said Riltana suddenly. “The one who lured me into House Norjah, so you could steal that painting! I owe you payback for that deception.”

The woman in green shrugged. “You can try. But as you say, I’ve already lost my life. Though it might be interesting to find out the limits of my existence in this realm.”

A hundred questions occurred to Chant—what was Madri talking about? Was she a ghost, or wasn’t she?

But the queen spoke. “You were with Demascus?”

Madri nodded. “Moments ago. We shared a tender moment of reflection concerning times long gone.”

Arathane frowned.

Chant broke in. “There’s no way we can get back to the island in an hour, let alone dig him out. We already tried and failed.”

“Then he’s dead after all,” said Madri. “As I told him.”

“Wait,” said Riltana. “If you were just there, could you go back again?”

“I’ve said my good-byes.”

“Even if by going back, you could save him?”

Madri glared at the thief as if the windsoul had just uttered the most shocking profanity.

“When I … flicker between destinations, I am unable to carry another being with me. Anyway, I’ll not save the one who killed me.”

“Then why’re you here?” said Chant. “If it’s his death you want, you have a damn odd way of showing it.”

Madri shared her glare with him, too. When her eyes flashed at him, it was all he could do not to look away.

Riltana snapped her fingers. With a mage’s flourish, she produced a small yellow sphere. She held it out to Madri. “Give this to Demascus. Tell him to recite what’s inscribed on it. It might get him out. If it doesn’t work, tell him … Riltana says sorry.”

Madri looked at the marble as if it was a poisoned candy.

“Take it,” urged Queen Arathane, her voice regal with command. “Save Demascus.”

Madri scowled at the ruler of Akanûl, but snatched the stone from Riltana. The ghost said, “I do this for me, not because you command it or because the rakshasa desires the opposite. If the future spirals into unknowable chaos, where no prophecy remains true, what do I care?”

“Rakshasa?” said Chant. “You mean Kalkan?” The pitch of his voice went up with surprise.

Madri ignored his question. “Demascus may follow directives, even those a child would think better of. I, though, will go my own way. And achieve my own ends. Although, if this does save him, tell him to look me up, won’t you? Tell him to come by the Copperhead and ask for me.”

Then Madri was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sea of Fallen Stars

21 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

The water washed the grit from Demascus's mouth and soothed the raw ache of his throat. It was sweet as anything he'd ever tasted.

"Easy. Don't drink too much at once," said Chant.

The deva stopped gulping liquid only when a cough racked him.

The pawnbroker clapped Demascus on the back, which sent the skiff rocking. "I told you!"

"Yeah." Demascus shook his head. Relief still made him giddy. His escape from the rockfall had been nothing less than magical. He'd been gasping on the last of his stale air when a pebble dropped on his head. He figured it was the beginning of a fresh cave-in, until he saw the flash of yellow. He'd picked up the stone, saw a cramped message inscribed across its diameter, and muttered it. Then the boulder at his back slipped aside as if on greased rollers. He'd slid dozens of yards along a dirt chute. *Up* the chute, which was confirmation enough he was hallucinating. The earth shuddered and groaned as if all the spirits of stone and earth were trying to crush him. Delirious with lack of air, he blacked out.

The next thing he remembered was being pulled from the mine depot on the surface of Ithimir Isle by his friends.

The thief had plucked a gold-colored globe from his belt loop just before they pulled him aboard the skiff. He'd been too confused to make anything of it then, but … it finally occurred to him what it must have been.

"Riltana, how'd I end up with your Prisoner's Stone?"

The windsoul darted a guilty look at Chant.

Demascus turned to the pawnbroker. “Well?”

“It was Madri. She brought you the stone; I gave it to her.”

“What?” He cocked his head, certain he’d misheard. “She told me she wanted to see me die!”

“She must’ve changed her mind,” said Chant.

Demascus swallowed. Sudden grief clutched him. That Madri or her ghost would save him, despite that she thought he’d killed her … it was overwhelming. She was a far, far better person than he. If their places were reversed, would he be so forgiving?

“Who is this Madri, and how’s she entangled with you?” asked the queen. “You must’ve done something terrible for her to hate you so. Yet you had something more, didn’t you?”

“I … We had a relationship,” he admitted. “A previous version of me did.” He was tired of making that distinction, between whom he was now and who his shards of memory suggested he’d been before. It was beginning to sound like a pretext, even to his own ears.

“You were lovers,” said the queen, more as a statement than a question.

“Yeah. And for some reason I can’t remember, my previous incarnation took a contract to end her life. She committed a crime the gods of Toril couldn’t forgive.”

Arathane’s eyes widened.

It occurred to him how difficult it was to surprise a monarch. But he’d managed it. Shame pierced Demascus. “I only claim a few oddments of memory and a few possessions from the one called Sword of the Gods. I didn’t kill Madri; he did. As Madri must have finally realized was true. Why else would she change her mind and save me?

The queen shrugged and gazed across the water. “Perhaps she has a more disagreeable surprise for you later.”

Green Siren II rolled along the Sea of Fallen Stars, making for the Bay of Airspur. Demascus savored the spray on his face, the cool wind, and the brine tang of the air. Unfortunately his physical relief at escaping the death trap under Ithimir Isle couldn't wipe away his worry over what Madri was up to. Chant had told him that his "old flame" was somehow involved with the rakshasa Kalkan. Who should still be dead! Even if rakshasas reincarnated after each death, it was too soon for the tiger-headed monstrosity to trouble Demascus again. Or so he'd assumed …

Six months ago when he'd defeated Kalkan Sword-breaker, he'd sworn to be prepared for Kalkan's return; that he'd take charge of his own destiny before his destiny took charge of him; that he'd try to reformulate his old identity by finding and taking up the Whorl of Ioun. He'd failed to even begin that process. Of course, he'd thought there was still time enough to start; only a quarter of the time span he'd arbitrarily decided it would take for Kalkan to return had elapsed. Still, nothing like waiting to the last moment before executing on a deadline …

But Madri changed things. The shard of memory containing his awful deed lay like a snake in his mind, coiled and ugly. He didn't want to be tempted or expected to do something like that ever again.

The Whorl of Ioun would help protect him from Kalkan—but he feared it would also return him to the kind of person who'd kill a lover at a god's command.

If the Whorl fell into his hands right then, he decided, he'd throw it into the sea. Because putting it on would murder who he'd become as fully and finally as the tons of stone in the mine almost had.

He wondered if it was Kalkan's plan that he renounce finding the Whorl. Or was he meant to have died in the mine cave-in after all? Madri's theft of the Whispering Child, itself a long-lost relic of Oghma, was also unlikely to be coincidental. But how Oghma connected to Kalkan, how

Kalkan connected to Madri, and how it all tied to him was impossible to understand without a few more clues.

"Madri," he said to the empty air. "Come see me?" If he could just talk to her one more time, maybe she'd explain what was going on and what her true role was in all this. The rakshasa must have brought her back from the dead, or arranged for it somehow. He couldn't take any decisive action without some answers.

He unsheathed Exorcessum. The last time he'd changed its configuration, Madri had appeared. She was somehow linked to the blade. If he transformed it again, perhaps she'd emerge before him. And maybe be more willing to listen to his apology.

An explosive report ruffled the sails as his sword went from a single blade to two, one in each hand. His ready stance and his tight-yet-loose grip on the hilts seemed somehow familiar while simultaneously alien. It sort of made his teeth hurt.

Madri did not appear. "Shadow take it," he cursed.

She was somewhere in Airpsur, probably. But where, exactly? And even if he knew, he couldn't go to her. Not yet. Not until after they'd raced back to the portal mouth, where they'd defeated the Gatekeeper and found the Demonweb.

The drow had to be dealt with, their point of infestation in Airpsur cauterized, and if possible, the mother lode of arambarium retrieved. The spiders already had a head start. And their approach to the city would go unmarked, and thus unopposed, because the floating arachnid armada, as Riltana described it, traveled high above the screen of clouds. Airspur's peacemakers would never even know a flight of spiders flittered high over their heads.

Queen Arathane commanded Thoster to full speed. Thoster laughed at the prospect of a race, even if he didn't exactly know the reason for it. He put *Green Siren* full sails into the wind. The man was bright enough to recognize the ruler wanted to return as quickly as possible to Airspur to

prevent the drow spider cloud from doing … something. The queen didn’t deign to describe the existence of a Demonweb entryway in Akanûl. The captain had already learned enough state secrets, starting with the arambarium mine’s location.

“Bring her into dock,” came Thoster’s voice, as if summoned by Demascus’s reverie, “but not so fast you stave in the prow, or I’ll have the lot of you dancing the hempen jig!”

They were already between the cliffs of the Bay of Airspur. Demascus went to see about borrowing two proper sheaths from the ship’s armory before they moored.



The streets of Airspur pulsed, but with commerce, not panic. No one had spied a flight of drifting invaders over the city. The only thing drawing excitement and occasional alarm was the skidding carriage they rode in, as it raced up the cliffside switchbacks. They rode on two wheels whenever they cornered, and each time Jaul whooped in delight. Queen Arathane had commandeered the first conveyance they’d come across upon reaching dry land. But that was only after she shouted down a courier and had a message delivered to the Court of Majesty, the contents of which essentially boiled down to a strict command to wait for her return, and that Tymanther was most assuredly not involved in the arambarium mine disruption.

“This one!” Demascus cried as they neared an herb shop, whose alleyway entrance to the Catacombs they’d taken the previous time they sought the Gatekeeper. Last time, the proprietor grudgingly allowed accessto the secret door in his cellar, in return for a few silver coins.

“That doesn’t look good,” said Riltana when they reached the shop. The roof of the shop was caved in, as if something large had landed on it. Or smashed down through it. The

door at alley level was closed, but a trickle of dark fluid spilled under it.

Demascus smashed the door open with his shoulder. The main room of the shop was slathered in webs, covering the counter, the floor, and the aromatic wares in pale strands. Clouded daylight illuminated the room. The shopkeep was bound on top of his counter as if on an altar. His chest cavity had been scooped out. Dark blood pooled where his heart and lungs should have rested. One eye stared up in naked terror. The other was a charred ruin.

“Monsters,” said Arathane. She slammed the butt of her spear on the shop floor.

“A sacrificial slaying,” said Chant. “Drow priestesses are big on that kind of thing.”

Demascus heard a quaver in the pawnbroker’s voice. He understood. The brutality perpetrated here was sickening. He’d been a killer, but he was certain he’d never tortured any of his victims selected by divine decree. Well, mostly certain.

“The blood hasn’t clotted,” said Riltana.

“Which means we’re not far behind them,” he said. He flew down to the cellar three stairs at a time. The others followed close behind.

The concealed door leading to the tunnels was off its hinges.

“Stop!” Chant yelled before Demascus could plunge into the Catacombs.

“What?”

“How in the name of Waukeen’s empty purse do you suppose they got a piece of mineral the size of a large shed down these steps or through that door into the tunnels? No way it’d fit.”

“Huh,” said Demascus. Of course the pawnbroker was right.

“Maybe they didn’t bring it through here?” said Jaul.

“What, you think all the spiderwebs up there and the shop owner missing his innards is the work of some *other* crazed spider priestess?” said Riltana.

“Don’t be an idiot, Pa. They must have come this way.” Jaul muttered something else under his breath and scowled.

“Maybe the shopkeep’s killing wasn’t just a sacrifice of opportunity,” said Chant. “It could have been part of a ritual to temporarily make the silver hand more manageable.”

“What, you mean like store it in an extra dimension?” said Riltana, and fanned her gloved fingers.

“Or enchant its shape,” said the queen. “I sense the residue of a powerful spell of transmutation. Chant’s right; Chenraya probably changed the relic into something easily transportable, like an amulet or a child’s stuffed toy.”

“A toy?” said Riltana. “More likely a dagger or a spool of web.”

“Could be,” allowed Arathane.

“How long would such a transformation last?” said Demascus.

“Does it matter?” said the queen. “We need to catch them before they slip away.”

“Right,” said Demascus. He turned and plunged into the Catacombs.

“Hey, do me a favor?” Riltana called from behind. “Warn us before we come to the sewer tunnel, so I can breath from my mouth. I don’t want to smell what I caught a whiff of last time.”

“Don’t worry,” he threw over his shoulder, “If you see me skid and slip, you’ll know I’ve just found a—”

An ettercap dropped on him. It bore him to the tunnel floor and knocked his swords flying. Its claws and mandibles scratched at his face. Demascus tried to grab it, but it was slick with sewer water. It scored a vicious cut across his palms and another down one arm with a serrated mandible.

Then a crossbow quarrel punched the ettercap in the side of its head. It relaxed and tumbled to one side. Demascus

grabbed his swords and stood. He was embarrassed, but shrugged it off as he scanned the tunnel for more attackers. It looked empty, though he could only see a few tens of feet with the light from Chant's sunrod. Speaking of the pawnbroker …

"Nice shot, Chant. Burning dominions, that thing caught me flat-footed."

"Is that what happened?" said Riltana. "I thought you'd found a new playmate to wrestle with."

He chuckled. "Yeah, apparently Chenraya left it behind to slow down any pursuit."

"If there's one, there's likely more," said the queen. Her hands were curled in tight fists around her spear, and a flicker of lightning danced on its point. She cut an impressive, beautiful figure …

Later, he told himself. Or better yet, never.

Demascus advanced down the passage. He went a little slower than before, and kept his lips buttoned. The thief stayed silent, too; apparently she'd decided to hold her wisecracks in check as well. He doubted that'd last long.

He led the group along the same route as last time. Except for new variations on diguisting smells that he didn't remember from before, nothing else surprised them on their way.

Finally they reached the chamber of the Gatekeeper. Overlapping vertical stone slabs framed the familiar courtyard, as well as a single arch on the opposite side of the chamber filled with orange haze. Sand was scattered across the floor. But unlike the first time they'd visited, it remained in random heaps, just as it'd fallen when they'd defeated the Gatekeeper. Claw- and footprints of many creatures made a furrow across the courtyard and up to the orange haze. That was new.

"They've gone through the portal," said Arathane. "On the other side lies the Demonweb?"

“Afraid so,” said Chant. “Not the safest place to be if you’re not invited. We saw a vampire lord overcome by what might’ve been an unconscious defense of the Demonweb itself—or worse, some splinter of Lolth’s actual attention.”

“I could probably hide myself from notice,” Demascus said, glancing at one of the white runes of *Exorcessum*, “In fact, I know I could. But not the rest of you.”

“Hidden or not, I don’t really want to go back in there again,” Jaul said. “The drow witch got away. If she’s in the Demonweb, she could be anywhere by now.”

“I intend to go through,” said Queen Arathane. “I am not willing to turn around without at least looking.” She fished in her belt pouch and pulled out a greasy, stubby piece of chalk.

“This can shield us from direct observation,” she explained, and drew a circle on her forehead. The chalk left behind a white smudge on her lavender skin.

“I can still see you,” said Riltana.

“Which proves you are not a magical sensor,” replied the queen. She held the chalk out to the thief. Riltana accepted the chalk, examined it for a moment, then made a similar mark on her own forehead.

Chant went next, then Demascus. The chalk was slippery in his hand, and the circle he traced on his forehead tingled.

Jaul put up his hands, “You know, really, I’d rather not go back in there.”

Chant said, “No one’s asking you to, son. In fact, I’d rather you waited out here. In case we don’t come back …”

“Indeed,” interrupted the queen. “In fact, take it as a royal decree, Jaul Morven. Remain here, and if we do not return within one day, take this signet ring to the Court of Majesty. Explain to the Four Stewards all that has happened here.”

Jaul swallowed and palmed the ring.

Demascus realized he was grinding his teeth with impatience. The sooner they finished here, the sooner he

could go look for Madri. “All right. Time to see if the queen’s sign will let us tread undisturbed in the Demonweb.”

“Good luck,” said Jaul, and turned away, rubbing at Raneger’s mark on his wrist.

Demascus entered the orange haze. He lost track of everything for a moment, as if the mist were slightly hallucinogenic. When it cleared, he was in a familiar stone corridor with the misted arch at his back. Ahead, the stone gave way to a spiraling tunnel of thick webs …

A large, blue-hued body lay at the intersection of stone and web. It was Lord Pashra, Chenraya’s oni ally. He advanced to study the body, ready in case it was actually some sort of ruse.

“It seems the drow have little stomach for alliances that outlive their immediate usefulness,” said the queen. The others had followed him through the portal.

“The drow are murdering, spider-fondling psychopaths,” said Riltana. “Everyone knows it. You’d have to be a complete idiot to imagine anything else.”

“Pashra is past imagining anything,” Chant said.

“And I’m not sad about that,” said Riltana. “The last time I saw him up close, he was no Prince Adorable, either.”

Demascus nudged the body with his foot. It was swollen and discolored with spider venom. He couldn’t restrain a shiver. When it came to considering various ways to die, he supposed he’d rather suffocate in a mine than be bitten to death by poisonous spiders.

A faint sound, like singing, sounded in the corridor.

Everyone heard it, but Demascus still put his finger to his lips. The singing rose and fell … rhythmic and purposeful, as if part of a ritual. And it was definitely a woman’s voice, probably belonging to Chenraya Xolarrin.

Demascus vaulted over the body and hustled toward the sound. A familiar acidic odor washed over him. Perhaps the smell was comforting to spiders and drow, but it reminded him of vomit. The tunnel was kinked and irregular; last time

it had been a fairly straight shot to the temple-like nexus of doors. If the portal network was this changeable … Well, it was disconcerting. If you stayed in the Demonweb long enough and managed to remain unnoticed by the defenses, you'd probably get lost in a constantly mutating web of corridors.

He glanced behind, making certain everyone was still following. It wouldn't do to lose any of his friends in here. Or for them to lose him.

He dashed around a corner and saw the same wide, high chamber as before, with the many gates. It was here they'd found a doorway into a dim tower castle, on the run from avenging vampires. Except … The nave and transept now hosted a small army. A brilliant light on the dais shone down on hundreds of ettercaps, spiders, and reanimated mine workers who filled the space like worshippers at service on a holy day. Demascus also noted a few driders, though they were larger and more bestial than the ones in the mine. Instead of hands, they sported lobster-like claws.

Chenraya was there, too, on the central dais. She'd acquired a ceremonial cloak since the debacle in the mine cavity, and new friends—four other drow gathered around her, all male. Three wore reflective black armor and the fourth wore wizardly robes spun of spider silk.

A silvery staff stood upright at the center of the dais. It sparked and flickered like a bonfire. The drow were entranced in its glow. Demascus squinted, and he saw that the staff's headpiece was an oversized clenched first. Sort of like a miniature version of what they'd seen in the mine … Right. If Arathane was correct, the staff was the magically transformed arambarium relic. The last thing Demascus noted was the arched ceiling. Or rather, the lack of it. The web directly over the dais gaped, like a giant's wet mouth.

Chenraya was singing in a deep, irregular tongue, melodic and haunting. The other drow called out an atonal

counterpoint that made the back of Demascus's throat itch. The cavity above the dais seemed to pulse wider with each completed verse.

"She's forming a new portal mouth," whispered Arathane. "It's probably easy enough for a drow priestess, here in the Demonweb."

Demascus managed not to jump. The others had caught up with him.

Riltana shook her head. "What now?" she whispered. "There's no way we can fight through that press. I could fly over, but … I don't fancy being out there all alone."

Arathane said, "We must stop the drow before she completes the new passage. This is our last chance. I'd guess the next stop for the arambarium relic is either Menzoberranzan or … directly into Lolth's demonic court itself."

Demascus didn't like the sound of *that*. And he worried Riltana and Arathane were being too loud. If even one of the drow or minion creatures looked up, they'd be seen. Actually, it was rather odd they hadn't already been noticed …

Arathane saw his puzzled expression. She tapped her forehead, just below the white chalk mark. Oh. The queen's magic chalk symbol was more potent then he'd realized. "As long as we don't draw direct attention to ourselves, the enchantment will hold. But we must stop Chenraya from finishing her rite," said Arathane.

Demascus said, "I can get into that circle and capture Chenraya's attention before I'm noticed. If the rest of you can keep her lackeys busy for a few moments, I can end her."

"Just take the staff," suggested Riltana. "Flash in, grab it *without* starting a fight, and come back here. Then we all flee like scared children. How's that sound?"

Not bad, actually. "Fine, *that's* what I'll do," he said.

Though a part of him growled at the idea of avoiding what would otherwise surely be a spectacular conflict. He pushed that feeling away. They were here to retrieve the mother lode, not assassinate a drow priestess. And if Chenraya and her underlings gave chase, logic suggested that to face them outside the confines of the Demonweb would be better than within this dim cavity where the drow had all the advantages.

“Here goes,” he said, and leaped into the stafflight shadow of a drider.

He had several shadows to pick from on the dais, thanks to the staff’s glaring illumination. Demascus appeared in the dimness behind a male drow soldier who wielded a long-handled glaive.

The sound of Chenraya’s song slowed and dropped in octave as everything around him lapsed into languid action. The song was a basso rumbling, and the drow were caught motionless, open-mouthed, and in mid-blink. The priestess’s eyes were raised to the vaulted web ceiling, an expression of divine transport frozen on her face. Had he wanted, he could have killed two or three of them before the others even realized he was ...

No. He’d come for the staff. Demascus slipped between moments and drow shoulders and grabbed the blazing length of transformed arambarium. He knew something was wrong the moment his fingers brushed the tingling metal. He jerked back. Or tried to. His hand remained stubbornly fixed around the buzzing shaft. The muscles in his arm and shoulders twitched, and he lost feeling in his legs. The stafflight pinched out, and time caught up with him like an axe stroke.

“Hello, deva,” said Chenraya, staring straight at him. “Welcome to my parlor. Trembles in the web suggested someone tasty would be along. Though I didn’t expect you; we dropped a mine on you to prevent that.”

“But here I am,” he managed to say through chattering teeth.

“Indeed. With your hand caught in the sweet jar, like a truant child. But I’m glad, because I have a use for you. I’d pegged Pashra to serve as the sacrifice I need to shift the Hand of Arambar back to its true form. Regrettably, he proved quarrelsome once too often. And so I had to deal with him before he learned of his surprise. But the Demon Goddess works in mysterious ways. Because here you are to take his place.”

“If you kill me, I’ll only return and hunt you down. I’m bound on the wheel of reincarnation.”

“No. You’re wrong. When I give your heart to Lolth, it won’t be just this mortal life she’ll strip from you. She’ll take every last future incarnation, too. She’s the Queen of the Demonweb Pits. When a soul is sacrificed to her, she lets no scrap fall between her mandibles.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Demonweb

21 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Screams clawed the air, high and piercing. They emerged from the edge of the surrounding crowd of drow slave-soldiers. Chenraya's gluttonous gaze shifted from Demascus as she searched for the cause. He didn't volunteer that the sounds were likely the result of his friends attacking the army's flank, to provide him a distraction. The momentary lapse of her regard lessened the paralyzing weight that'd settled over his mind.

He uttered a plea for divine radiance, made to the universe at large. In answer, a burning mark scribed the air directly over his head. The mark wasn't as brilliant as the noonday sun, but it was still damn bright. The drow on the raised dais were creatures of the Underdark and unused to anything brighter than dim cave light. The robed drow and the two warriors turned, Chenraya fell back, and the last warrior threw a forearm over his eyes. If any of them had been vampires, they might have taken fire, too. Sadly, none sizzled, not even a little.

However, the dazzling light erased any shadows close enough for him to work with. He hadn't thought his ploy all the way through. Worse, his body remained determinedly locked in paralysis to the staff, which itself was planted as solidly as a five-hundred-year-old tree in the forest. And the blades of *Exorcessum* were tidily sheathed in the scabbards he'd borrowed from Thoster. The red-runed blade was only inches from his left hand, but thanks to the aching rigidity of his muscles, it might as well have been a mile.

“Veil!” he rasped, “Help me!” The scarf uncoiled from his neck in billowing loops. One end wriggled down his arm and wrapped the staff’s headpiece. The other end whipped out like a striking adder. It caught one drow warrior around the neck in a winding grasp. The moment of contact between drow and staff closed, lightning cracked the air. And Demascus’s muscles eased, just as the drow warrior dropped, smoke issuing from eye sockets.

The Veil went limp, steaming and a little blackened at the edges. Demascus fell, too, in a convincing imitation of a rag doll. He hit the web floor with one shoulder and tucked into a flopping roll that moved him a few paces closer to the edge of the dais. He found himself staring up into the face of another drow warrior holding a glaive with a spike on the end.

The drow tried to stab him with the pointy bit.

Demascus jerked out of the way. The spike grazed his armor but failed to pierce flesh. As the warrior raised the glaive for a second try, Demascus pulled his knees up to his chest, then lashed out as if his legs were a released spring. He smashed a boot heel into the warrior’s knee. The joint made a funny popping sound. The drow collapsed, gasping in surprise at his sudden inability to hold his own weight.

And Demascus was up. He was shaking like a drunkard too long deprived of drink, sure, but being on his feet was better than on his back.

The three remaining drow—the last warrior, the fellow in the wizardly robes, and Chenraya—got their bearings. The howling ettercaps and driders kept up their din. Demascus hoped his friends were responsible. At least none of the driders had yet tried to climb the dais to help their mistress, despite that Demascus was in among the drow leaders, killing or disabling them one by one.

One by one … Yes. That was how it was supposed to be. None of this stealing and running. The Sword of the Gods

might strike from the shadows, but he never, ever ran from a fight. A cold grin stretched Demascus's lips.

The imprimatur of his ancient office swept the deva into its joyous, bloodythirsty embrace.

"The Sword has come," he said, his voice suddenly resonant. His announcement gave all the drow pause. Even Chenraya blanched. His eyes sparked as he considered how he'd exterminate each one in turn. The wonderful thing about his office was that he was allowed to remove everyone who learned of its existence, at his sole discretion. Which was convenient.

His weapons were out and moving in a rhythm of defending curves and slashing threats, though he didn't recall drawing them. The runes on each blade flared brighter and lifted slightly from the metal. The interweaving of his kata created a light painting in the air, a palimpsest of rune on rune, red on white, a fractal lure capable of fascinating the weak-minded.

None of the dark elves, however, apparently suffered from that particular mental handicap. The last warrior narrowed his eyes, hefted his ebony shield, and flicked his short sword from its sheath, launching a fluid series of cuts. Demascus parried each with his weaving blades. But the warrior caught each of Demascus's countering cuts just as deftly on his shield.

This one was skilled! And wasting the deva's time. Each moment he spent fencing gave Chenraya and the robed drow time to marshal their own attacks. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the priestess gesticulating, purple light building on her fingertips.

"Lolth blast you!" screamed Chenraya, her arms suddenly motionless in a pose of exultation. The hair on Demascus's neck lifted as if something immensely powerful moved beneath him like a sea monster under the waves threatening to breach.

The deva threw himself to one side. A gray bolt of power sundered the air where he'd been standing, brushing him, and where it touched, he lost feeling. The deadened spots were only a spattering, but each one was more than mere numbness; they were like holes in his existence. He laughed. He felt most alive when the stakes were highest! Even though a distant part of his mind was yelling at him to be careful, the Sword ignored it.

The drow warrior cut a trail of blood in the deva's forearm with his flicking short sword. Demascus's counterblows banged harmlessly on the shield. He should probably stop playing and neutralize them, before they coordinated their offensive. He lurched toward the muttering male wizard, whom the deva had left alone for too long. The warrior got in his way and, still startled, left off whatever spell he'd been concocting with a surprised exclamation that summoned the night. A natural ability these dark elves drew on instinctively when threatened, some past life whispered in his ear.

Blackness pinched out Demascus's mark of radiance and settled over the central circle, blotting out all that occurred within its velvet cover. The drow could see perfectly in the dimness.

And with a flick of the Veil, it wrapped around his head like a blindfold, so the Sword could sense his surroundings, too. The scarf was still recovering from its previous exploit, though, so everything seemed scratchy and uncertain.

Chenraya was chanting again, maybe preparing for another shivering blast of divine power. The robed one who'd summoned darkness dug in the satchel hanging at his belt, searching for something.

The warrior charged. Demascus pretended to stumble, using the motion to duck under a sword swing as he went down on one knee. He shuffled and made a quarter turn so he was again directly between the two remaining male drow. Chenraya was still out of reach.

The wizard yelled something in a tongue Demascus didn’t recognize. Probably something like, “He can see us!”

Demascus grinned. “I am the Sword of the Gods,” he intoned. “Do you think darkness could deny an assassin of heaven?”



Queen Arathane called the storm. Despite how far they were beneath the surface, lightning answered and thunder roared. With her spear, she blasted waves of ettercaps, spiders, and lurching animated miners, rendering them indistinguishable smoking heaps. Even so, new waves of foes clambered over the wreckage to reach her.

Riltana and Chant fought at her side. The three of them constituted a competent and impressive force. Chant never missed with his enchanted crossbow. Riltana’s swordplay was dazzling. But there were too many. The spiders seemed endless, and it wasn’t the large ones that worried the queen most. It was the tiniest ones; they were hardest to notice.

Then the inevitable finally happened. A tiny scarlet recluse scuttled up Arathane’s armor and bit her neck. It felt like a splinter of lava under her skin. She slapped the spider away. The pain and a wave of dizziness made her stagger.

“Your Majesty?” said Chant, turning to her. Then an ettercap lying prone at the pawnbroker’s feet ended its ruse; it latched onto Chant’s leg and bit. Blood splattered.

Riltana rushed from behind and knifed the creature, even as a new wave of ettercaps closed.

Chant waved Riltana back with one hand as he shot a bolt that divided three times to lay low as many ettercaps. He took a step and winced. Blood trickled down his leg from the bite. He said, “Are you all right, Your Highness?”

Arathane lied, “I’m fine. How about you?” A thread of weakness wound down her spine and sent feelers into her arms and legs. But she made a show of discharging another blast, scattering a new mass of attackers.

However … if the venom spread any farther, her facade would crumble.

As a monarch, that just wouldn’t do. “We need to consider pulling out.” Even if that meant leaving Demascus? It pained her to contemplate it, but a leader couldn’t be swayed by sentiment.

Riltana narrowed her eyes. “What’s taking that leech-son deva so long?”



“Demascus!” someone called near the entrance. He couldn’t see that far with the scarf around his eyes, so he snatched it away. The drow dimness had lapsed, and normal vision was possible. He saw the floor between him and the exit was blocked by a mass of screaming ettercaps, groaning undead, and at least one drider. A glitter of storm-sharp light, followed by thunder, threw a handful of shadows across him before it guttered out. A fierce fight raged there.

“Demascus? Get your ass back here with that staff! We need to leave!” the voice came again. It was familiar … a woman he knew. He just wasn’t sure it concerned him. Especially not when he had three such premier targets to deal with. Not when the killing-glee sparked on his spine like a fuse, promising a wondrous detonation.

The drow wizard produced a scroll from his bag. But the warrior prevented Demascus from doing anything about it with his dancing sword. His facility with the weapon surprised Demascus. Few foes had ever fended him off for so long. Especially when hindered by having only one blade to the deva’s two. In Demascus’s defense, the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge was oddly unresponsive. Its ends were flapping all about without guidance. The scarf should have kept its ends tucked out of the way.

Finally Demascus broke around the warrior and charged the wizard. The same sensation as before, of something

indefinably large moving just beyond sight, feathered across Demascus.

“Chenraya,” screamed the dark elf wizard, followed by something Demascus couldn’t understand. He assumed it was something along the lines of “You betraying bitch!”

Another fountain of awful energy burst from the floor. The blast swept away the remaining bits of darkness clotting the air, its virulence too extreme to allow any lesser blight in its presence.

Demascus leaped into a flailing shadow created by a lightning glare from the periphery of the chamber. He slipped into it not a heartbeat before the drow priestess’s calling engulfed the space where he’d been and where the drow wizard still screamed in fury and terror. He stepped across the all-too-brief shadow lane caused by a dying lightning bolt. He stepped back into reality at Chenraya’s elbow. What remained of the drow wizard was a greasy pool of flesh in which floated oddments of clothing. The single remaining drow glared at the priestess with undisguised hate.

The priestess was cackling.

Chenraya had just swatted down an able-bodied ally, even though it lessened her chances of beating Demascus, just because of the charge she got from killing. The realization partially woke Demascus from his daze. His assassin’s guise and power threatened to slip from him entirely. I’m not anything like her, he thought. I only kill those who deserve it. Those whose fate and the gods command! Except that you *enjoy* it, he accused himself. All too much.

He could imagine Riltana’s voice. “Now’s not the time to contemplate your navel, idiot!”

The final drow warrior saw Demascus appear behind Chenraya. But the dark elf didn’t betray the deva’s presence to the priestess. Demascus realized he’d just made an ally, if only briefly, in the drow’s hate for Chenraya.

Demascus sheathed his white-runed blade and snatched up the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge in his free hand. The fabric stirred at his touch. He turned to Chenraya. But he couldn't detect the Veil's secret shadow, the dim shroud only he could see. No time to wonder why.

He sheathed his other blade, then flipped the Veil around the drow priestess's neck and pulled it tight. Sometimes the best tricks were the oldest.

Chenraya tried to gasp. But the scarf was already so tight she only squeaked. Then she thrashed like a bear caught in a trap. Her strength amazed him. Her feminine frame belied the vicious power of her limbs. He kicked her behind the knees and pulled her head back. With her feet no longer completely supporting her weight, her ability to resist was curbed. But she still flailed and pummeled like a demon. And he supposed she might partly be one, given whom she worshipped.

The drow warrior seemed to finally decide his distaste for Chenraya was less than his hatred for someone who would lay a hand on one of his own. He rushed the deva.

Demascus circled, trying to keep Chenraya between himself and the warrior. Her resistance allowed a few of the warrior's quick sword thrusts to prick him, though none seriously. Besides, he only needed to keep pressure around her neck for just a few more heartbeats and Chenraya would be done. Just to be sure, he tied off the scarf as tightly as possible.

Her cloak picked that moment to reveal itself as an animate threat. The dark material spilled off her like liquid. Then it inflated, appearing for all the world like a very large spider with huge, razor-sharp mandibles. They snapped with convincingly loud clacks and tried to bite the deva around the neck. His only choice was to release his choke on the priestess or risk losing his head to a decapitating bite. He threw himself back.

Chenraya lurched forward, into the arms of the drow warrior. Her cloak-guardian retained its newfound spider shape and advanced. Demascus swept *Exorcessum's* twin blades out of their sheaths. The hilts fit his hands as if made for him. He laughed. With the tools of his office in hand, did these drow really think they could stand before him?

He stepped up to meet the advancing cloak-spider. Chenraya, eyes still bugged out and skin noticeably pale from the scarf still fastened around her neck, squeaked out a single word. A word like the one used by the other dark elf to shroud the dais in darkness.

This word summoned arachnids. A blinding downpour of black, biting spiders, impossible to see through, or live through, if one wasn't drowborn!

He slipped out from beneath the hem of lowering arachnids by a hair's breadth. A few sticky legs latched onto him even as he spun away from the swarming mass by leaping from the dais. He awkwardly swatted at the crawling things before they could find a chink in his armor or crawl up his chest and onto his face. Even for someone like him, it was awkward to swat spiders while holding two swords and still land on his feet from a dozen-foot fall into a crowd of monsters, most of which were waiting for him.

Chenraya couldn't breathe. What felt like iron cable constricted her throat. The deva had abandoned the dais, but not his strangling cord. Though spiders shrouded her like a feather bed, she took no comfort from it. She could see perfectly well through the otherwise solid mass of swarming arachnids. The last Bregan D'aerthe mercenary stood unmoving, studying her. She gesticulated, mouth agape, eyes bulging, at the constriction at her throat. For all her strength, she couldn't loosen it. Alarm and fear coursed in her blood like acid. She might die here!

The male finally took action. He spun her around and fumbled at a fabric knot that bulged at the nape of her neck. Only moments had slipped by, but the pressure behind her eyes expanded like a balloon, and exploratory fingers of darkness intruded on her vision. For the first time in her long life, Chenraya couldn't see, not through this darkness. She panicked. No strength remained, so she flailed, with no breath to call out to Lolth for aid; she couldn't even gasp. Whether she lived or died was all down to a single drow mercenary whose name she'd refused to learn. Which meant …

This is it, she thought. She'd have collapsed, but the swarming spiders held her upright with hundreds of tiny legs. Miraculously, the strangling cord was pulled away! She sucked in huge breaths. The surrounding swarm gave her space to breath.

"You saved me," she rasped to the figure before her.

The last Bregan D'aerthe nodded. He held the offending white length of fabric in one hand. He took her left hand with the other. His grasp was warm, warmer than she would have guessed. She had never allowed herself such intimacy with the inferior sex before.

She cleared her throat. "I owe you a great debt. Please tell Lolth that, through you, her plans have moved a step closer to completion."

"What?"

She plunged her favorite dagger into the mercenary's heart with her right hand. Then she chanted the keystone word that would finally create the opening to her home, to Menzoberranzan.

The drow collapsed, his eyes round with accusation. It was the last expression he ever made. The strangling cord in his hands trembled, then slithered down the dais like a white snake. She let it go; it no longer mattered. The entire Demonweb was shuddering. Her ritual had come to fruition. The temporary portal in the ceiling shuddered open.

Oh, such glory would be hers! She’d acquired a portion of a dead Primordial so powerful, yet so tractable, that it would prove the perfect component. Thanks to her, Lolth’s coming apotheosis would succeed. And when Lolth became the new Goddess of Magic and the Weave, wouldn’t she raise Chenraya Xolarrin up as her first exarch?

Yes, Chenraya decided, as the influence of the temporary gate pulled her into its embrace. And as an exarch, a divine being in her own right, she’d be in a position to deal with her lessers as they deserved. A time of reckoning for the less-fair sex was imminent.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DEMONWEB

21 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

DEMASCUS LANDED IN THE MASS OF SLAVE-SOLDIERS AT least ten feet from the dais base. He didn't land gracefully, and he garnered a few more bites. But he'd escaped the shroud of spiders above, and was on his feet a moment later, his twin swords accelerating like threshing blades. Two ettercaps rushed him, hoping to bring him down while he was still distracted. Their hope was in vain. Spidery ichor sprayed those shoving closer, a gory warning to the others to stay clear of him unless they wished the same.

He grinned, as the office of the Sword once more began to expand across his awareness—

"Demascus!" The cry for aid was louder than ever and truly desperate this time. A note of despair cut through his killing trance, enough that he was able to recognize Riltana's voice.

"Chant's hurt; Arathane's poisoned. Help!"

The top of the dais remained within the swarm summoned by Chenraya. He'd left the Veil knotted tight around the priestess's neck. If fate willed it so, the scarf had already strangled her to death.

He leaped over a reanimated miner, severing its head with a horizontal sweep of his blade. As he came down, he kicked an ettercap full in its face, breaking its mandibles. It screamed and fell back into its fellows. Demascus glanced to the top of the dais and saw the gods were *not* merciful. The platform was no longer cloaked in spiders. Chenraya stood alone, holding the silvery staff in one hand, rubbing her neck with the other.

Demascus saw no sign of any of the other drow or the Veil.

The hollow in the ceiling opened wider. And something popped. The air pressure in the chamber had increased. The domed portion of the ceiling had become a portal mouth to somewhere new. He felt dizzy. His mind insisted he wasn't looking up, but rather that he was gazing down, as if taking in the view from a scenic point poised high above a massive subterranean vault. A magnificent dark city stretched out below him, with many structures carved into the sides of living stalagmites. Points of light striped each massive stone pillar, dotted the stone bridges that connected them, and spread out deeper like countless stars. Figures with skin dark as tar and hair like fresh snow moved with elven grace across the bridges and through the streets and galleries.

"Menzoberranzan!" screamed Chenraya. "I return! With a prize suitable for a goddess!"

As if naming the city made it real, ettercaps and reanimated miners around the base of the dais began to fall *up* into the portal mouth. Chenraya didn't fall; she ascended, as if lifted by a mother's careful hand.

Now or never, thought Demascus, as his own body began to feel a countervailing pull *up* through the portal. He tried to judge his own weight, Chenraya's upward momentum, the changing gradient of pull between the floor and the portal.

He gathered his feet beneath him and leaped. As he'd guessed, the pull from the portal almost seemed to give him wings. He sailed in a high arc, intersecting Chenraya before she realized she was under attack. The drow held the staff high, jubilantly. Demascus merged *Exorcessum* into a single long blade even as he swung, aiming to sever Chenraya's wrist.

The report of the blades' merger drew the priestess's attention. She retracted her arm in surprise. Instead of shearing off her hand at the wrist, *Exorcessum* cut through the shaft itself, immediately above where she gripped it.

The staff’s upper half and headpiece spun free. Demascus snatched it out of the air as his momentum propelled him away. His lateral speed carried him out from under the portal mouth, and the strength of its pull eased.

“No!” raged Chenraya behind and above him.

Demascus came down on the webbed floor. He watched the drow priestess convulsing in apoplectic rage as she passed through the portal mouth. She retained her hold on the lower portion of the staff, which he supposed still represented a generous fraction of the transformed relic. But he’d rescued the greater amount.

“Lolth slay you all!” Chenraya screeched from the other side of the portal, still falling away. “Rise, Demonweb; rise, ye manifestation of the Demon Queen!Destroy every creature infesting the crossroads—drow, ettercap, drider, and most especially those who have just denied you the—”

The portal in the ceiling snapped shut. Chenraya, the fragment of the relic she’d managed to retain, and the image of a drow city called Menzoberranzan were gone.

The pull exerted through the portal ceased; down was down once more. A rain of slave-soldiers fell hard to the floor. Something touched Demascus’s ankle. He yelled and flinched back before he saw that it wasn’t a web line—it was the Veil. It wound up his leg and tied itself snugly around his neck.

“Burning dominions,” he said to no one in particular.

An ettercap clacked its mandibles at him in the silence. Silence … Wait, hadn’t someone been calling his name? Where were his friends? He peered across the transept to the entrance. Though a few slave-soldiers had fallen up through the portal, most remained in the Demonweb, still blocking easy access into and out of the chamber. But he couldn’t see Riltana, Arathane, or Chant.

Demascus fended off a couple of animated corpses and one halfhearted attack from an ettercap. The creatures had all witnessed the departure of their mistress. In her absence,

they seemed confused and fearful. Their anxiety and uncertainty was his chance to depart through the milling press. He didn't have much time. If Chenraya's parting words were any indication, in moments the Demonweb would rouse itself to destroy everyone within this chamber.

A charging drider interrupted his methodical escape through the crowd. The drider must've started on the periphery of the chamber. It dashed toward the dais, running over Chenraya's slave-soldiers like an icebreaker in a frozen strait. Its eyes were fixed over the deva's head, on the ceiling that had so recently hosted a portal. The drider keened like a lost child. And as fate would have it, Demascus was directly between it and its destination. Slave-soldiers scattered to get out of its way.

He wasn't sure he could take down a drider *and* fend off the surrounding press simultaneously, now that the office of the Sword had slipped entirely from him. Luckily the drider was distracted. If he managed it just right, he might be able to get past the drider without a fight.

Demascus accelerated, moving directly toward the approaching creature. At the last instant, the deva lay back into a slide. He skimmed under the drider's arachnid belly, nose just inches from the black carapace of its abdomen. He caught a whiff of something alkaline.

And he almost made it.

But the creature caught him with an anchoring web filament squirted from a fat spinneret. The filament pulled him up short, and he almost fumbled the staff. He stuffed its foreshortened length into his belt and fastened both hands on Exorcessum. He swept the blade through the restraining web, then rolled out from beneath the arachnid-drow before it could squash him merely by lowering its bulk.

He shouted, "I've dispatched your mistress. If you don't let me pass, I'll do the same for you."

That's when they all went mad.

Ettercap turned on ettercap, reanimated miner upon fellow miner. A nearby corpse plucked a dashing spideroid from the ground with undead strength and tossed it into the air like a ball. A contingent of ettercaps swarmed a corpulent miner like ants on a piece of meat.

“What in the name of all the Hells?” Apparently Chenraya’s servitors were sensitive to some influence Demascus couldn’t detect. He doubted his threat was the cause.

The creatures’ earlier anxiety and confusion was transformed into violent psychosis. Despite destroying three in as many rapid eye blinks, another spideroid was already bull-rushing him, trying to bite his face off with clacking mandibles.

Demascus flinched back. The horny ridges of a drider thorax on his shoulder blades caged him in place. Oh, yeah—how’d he manage to forget about the drider?

The attacking ettercap slipped past his guarding blade and slammed a balled fist into his head before he managed to hew it into two ichor-squirting segments.

Dazed and blinking, the deva twisted to face the drider. It meant turning his back on slave-soldier mayhem, but he judged they were less of a threat than the drider.

The drider had arrived at a similar conclusion. It slammed a massive pincer claw at Demascus’s head. He grunted with the effort of deflecting it with his blade. The impact jarred his shoulders, and forced him several paces back. Fortunately the creatures around him seemed as much interested in tearing each other leg from leg as getting a taste of deva meat.

The drider screamed something in its own language, expelling a spray of spittle with the vehemence of its pronouncement. Probably a curse of some sort, but hopefully not a literal one. Demascus backed away another step. Where were his friends?

He dodged a loose ettercap head hurled by a reanimated genasi, dodged another drider pincer claw, and severed the arm from a slave-soldier already bleeding from several wounds.

The drider charged, its pincers raised high, promising a lethal denouement. Demascus sidestepped the monster, but his foot caught on the loose head he'd earlier evaded. He went down hard, somehow managing to knock the wind out of himself on the webbed floor.

He sucked air as he attempted to regain his feet, only to be bashed back to the ground by a pincer. A thread of pain pulsed on the left side of Demascus's body where the pincer tip had scored.

He internally searched for any remaining vestige of the Sword of the Gods. It was almost as if he'd exhausted its ability to manifest with his earlier fight with Chenraya. That, or the power didn't like to be summoned; it liked to appear of its own accord, and was *choosing* to withhold its grace now—

The deva rolled away from another blow and managed to get Exorcessum up into guard. At least its power remained constant, evident in its blazing runes of red and white. His attacker paused, and Demascus finally managed to regain his feet. The sour, rotten smell of the drider's breath engulfed him, nearly a presence in itself—one hardly less lethal than the monster.

Something struck him from behind hard enough to make him stumble. He groaned. Too many foes surrounded him. Light and shadow, where the Hells was his mastery? He tried to remember a word of power or a glyph of—

Thunder rode the heels of a crazy line of electric light that zagged past Demascus and impacted whatever was attacking him from behind.

He followed the blast back to its source and saw Queen Arathane, mantled in snapping sparks.

The queen was alive! And kicking. Relief warmed him.

The drider took advantage of Demascus's distraction with another flurry of pincer strikes, forcing him back behind the point of his blade. He risked another glance at Arathane. She remained visible through the press, and he saw Chant and Riltana, too. They'd remained where he'd told them, of course.

Demascus deflected another blow, and gouged a bloody furrow up one of the drider's arms. A bare instant later, flesh closed up where he'd torn it. Damn, the thing was regenerating its flesh. It enjoyed too many blessings of Lolth for the deva's comfort.

The thought triggered a recollection. Oh, yeah, *that's* how it was done! With a mental command, he activated one of the red runes on his blade. A rune in the shape of a tongue of fire.

"Burn!" he commanded, and swung the blade of his sword low along the ground, surprising the drider. Expecting another slash, it danced back. The triggered fire rune jumped from the blade like a flying fish from the sea. The drider attempted to evade, but the rune exploded into a sphere of raging flame. The creature was enveloped. Demascus dove away from the fury of the blast and failed to keep his feet. Which was becoming tiresome; he'd spent an inordinate amount of the fight on his face.

When the fire faded into sizzling wisps a heartbeat later, the monster survived only as a flaming heap of legs and pincers waving a thin banner of black smoke.

Then Demascus got up and sprinted along the irregular lane between the slave-soldiers, many of whom were momentarily enthralled by the drider's fiery destruction.

He reached the chamber entrance. Chant was reloading his crossbow. Up close, he saw that Arathane was unsteady on her feet and much the worse for wear.

Riltana said, "Took your damn time," but smiled.

“I’ve got the staff!” he shouted. He pulled the foreshortened length from his belt with one hand and waved *Exorcessum* like a lunatic in the other. “Most of it, anyway.”

Behind him, the chamber itself convulsed. A shriek of pure hatred rang the Demonweb like a bell. The sound was equal parts demonic bloodlust and a promise of endless death. No mortal throat could have produced such a horrible noise. And the fury of the remaining ettercaps and undead miners in the chamber had increased. Perhaps their madness wasn’t so unexplainable after all. The mind in the Demonweb, Lolth herself, was rousing to fury.

“Time to go,” said the queen.



Demascus herded the others before him down a webbed tunnel that pulsed like the throat of a swallowing giant. Chant moved as if his impressive girth was an illusion. But a particularly loud scream made him slow and glance behind him, his brow furrowed.

“Faster!” Demascus yelled. “Don’t stop!”

“Tell us something we *don’t* know,” came Riltana’s retort from farther down the bucking tunnel. The windsoul had the lead, literally flying, but Arathane was her shadow; the queen seemed to ride a chariot of lighting.

Demascus glanced over his shoulder.

A wave of arachnid fury filled the temple chamber they’d just left. Spiders in uncountable thousands boiled forward like stew on a cookstove. Their mandibles frothed with poison and malice. Not even the slave-soldiers were immune—ettercaps and the remnant undead miners were consumed so quickly they might as well have been disintegrated.

“Lords of light and shadow,” he murmured. The swarm flooded into the web corridor after the group, surging more quickly than even Riltana could fly.

“Sharkbite,” gasped Chant, breathless and suddenly more scared than intrigued by his situation. It seemed he’d finally

realized that they might not make it. His eyes were wide as they saw a pang of mirrored fear in the deva's expression.

"Just go!" Demascus yelled. If the exit had been even twenty feet farther, Chant would've been right. As it was, dozens of tiny spiders launched themselves from the swarm crest before Demascus, bringing up the rear and plunging into the orange-misted portal. They lit on his arms, head, and back, and began biting. He swatted and rolled as he spilled through the transition into the courtyard.

Then the spiders were gone, as if they'd been scraped away. But their wounds remained. He scratched at a welter of red bumps on his forearm, eyeing the portal. If the swarm billowed out, the courtyard would be instantly swamped.

"Those creatures," said Arathane between big breaths, "weren't real. They were manifestations of the Demonweb. Those spiders simply don't exist outside Lolth's portal network."

"You hope," said Chant. Then he blushed, and added, "Your Majesty."

"I guess we'll see," said Riltana, who was already on the far side of the courtyard. "Maybe the rest of you should come and stand by me, just in case."

Everyone shuffled over to the windsoul. The portal remained quiescent for another span of heartbeats. Just a quiet arch filled with colorful mist.

Demascus said, "Your Majesty? You'd better take this." He handed her the staff.

The queen received the arambarium relic with solemn dignity. "Demascus—all of you—Akanûl owes you a great debt."

Riltana smiled. A laugh escaped Demascus as he regarded the scene. What did it say about him that nearly everyone he called a friend in Airspur had only a nodding acquaintance with the rule of law? On the other hand, being on speaking terms with the queen of the entire country balanced out that particular equation, with coin to spare.

Arathane continued, “It appears no spiders or dark-elf assassins are going to immediately rush out of the portal. But I won’t have such a vile passage in my land. Demascus, could I ask you one more favor?”

“Of course.”

“Stand guard over the portal mouth until I return, with a company of Akanûl sappers and elite peacemakers. We’ll collapse this entire cave and portal so that nothing can ever use it again.”

Demascus said, “I’ll watch over it. But hurry. I’m so tired I’m starting to hallucinate that I’m sleeping, not talking. Riltana, would you go with the queen, escort her out of the Catacombs?”

Arathane smiled at him and winked. He did a doubletake; had that been real or an invention of his tired mind? The queen whirled, all her stately grace back in full measure. “Would you do me the honor?” she asked the windsoul.

Riltana said, “Love to. Demascus and Chant can handle things here without me. I can’t wait to get out of this stink hole.”

“Wonderful,” Arathane said. “We’ll be back within two hours, no more.” She and Riltana left, the queen cradling the broken staff as if it was an infant.

Chant fidgeted.

“What’s wrong?” asked Demascus.

“I thought Jaul would be waiting for us, is all.”

Right. Chant’s son said he’d stay behind at the portal mouth. But the kid was nowhere to be seen. “Do you think he’s all right?”

Chant rubbed his hands, then sighed. “Yeah, I *do* think he’s all right. I just hoped he’d wait, like he said. But really, it’s more like him to get bored and head back to the Den of Games. Raneger has that boy brainwashed.” The pawnbroker looked at his boots.

Demascus could only nod. No matter how useful Jaul had earlier proved while they’d been out on the island, it seemed

he would continue to be a trial to his father.

Chant shook his head as if to clear it. “Anyhow, that’s the second time you’ve come to the aid of the Throne of Majesty. That sort of thing can’t hurt your standing with the queen.”

Demascus nodded, unable to hold back a grin. “But before you get too happy imagining what royal rewards might await, I promised the ghost I’d relay a message.”

Demascus’s face froze. “What?”

“She said that if you survived this escapade, you were to come by the Copperhead and ask for her.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this. You know that.”

“Sorry. I just … you caught me off-guard. So, the Copperhead? What’s that?”

The pawnbroker just shrugged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The City of Airspur, Akanûl
22 Leaffall, the Year of the Ageless One (1479 DR)

Fragrant smoke greeted Demascus as he entered the Copperhead. He'd learned it was a tavern that specialized in tabac, not ale. Either way, it seemed like an odd place for a ghost to haunt.

He wondered if his friends had misunderstood Madri.

He scanned the hazy chamber. Scents of apple, cedar, jasmine, and tabac swirled above the gurgle of bubbling water. Relaxed expressions softened the faces of the patrons. It was all somehow familiar to Demascus. As if he'd been here before. Or someplace remarkably similar. Madri, however, wasn't here.

"Sir?" said a young earthsoul. "If you step over here, I can fit you with a pipe. Have you ever—"

"I'm looking for a woman. A human. Her name is Madri," said Demascus.

The server blinked as if seeing the deva for the first time. "I have a message for someone answering to your description."

"What?" Demascus felt his face grow warm.

The server held up a placating finger, then pointed to an empty table along the wall. "Only this—if someone fitting your description shows up, that you should have a seat and wait right there."

"For how long?"

"Until Madri shows up."

"Do you know her?" said Demascus, stepping closer.

The server's eyes widened and his hands went up. Demascus realized he'd raised his voice. But he didn't much

care.

“Answer me,” he said.

“I don’t! She … she comes here sometimes! Sort of just shows up, you know? Last time I saw her, she gave me this message. That’s all!”

“When did she give it to you?”

“Two days ago. I haven’t seen her since. I swear!”

“I believe you. I just … haven’t seen my friend for a while.”

The server looked at him, then flicked his gaze to the sword scabbards on the deva’s belt. The kid was worried Demascus was going to draw on him. Great. He’d just guaranteed himself terrible service henceforward at the Copperhead. He took a seat where the server indicated and waited.

No one came by to offer him a water pipe.

Three days had passed since Chant had relayed Madri’s message. Sealing the portal by collapsing the cave had come off without a hitch, thanks to the skills of a cadre of earthsoul sappers. Demascus was pretty sure no drow or other fell influence had seeped through before it was shut. Hopefully for good.

Arathane had explained that the arambarium relic had been remanded to a vault beneath Airspur Palace. When asked if anyone in the queen’s court had managed to convert it back to its original shape, the monarch had replied that they were still working on it.

Then Arathane had handed Riltana a scroll. She said it was a copy of what she’d sent to a mutual friend in High Imaskar. Riltana broke the seal and visually devoured the contents in moments. Then she hugged the queen.

Riltana later joked that the peacemaker bodyguards had nearly shat themselves upon witnessing such physical familiarity with Her Royal Highness by someone they’d been told was a “messenger.”

Of course the Stewards had *not* launched a preemptive attack on Tymanther. The queen returned from the

Demonweb in time to quiet the drumbeat to war with evidence of Akanûl's true enemy in hand.

The next day, Chant had engaged his network of secret gatherers to locate the Copperhead. Airspur was a large city. If you didn't already know an establishment, a name by itself was just the first clue to tracking it down.

And just what was the situation? Madri had seemed intent on making him pay for what he'd done to her. But when she had the chance to let this incarnation die in the mine collapse, she'd saved him. He needed to find out why. He also needed to uncover her connection to Kalkan, how she'd come back from death, and what she intended to do with the Whispering Child called the Necromancer.

"I see you've managed to scare the waitstaff witless."

Demascus jumped. "Madri!"

"Last time I checked." She sat down across from him. She hadn't been in the room a moment earlier, but she didn't look the least bit like a ghost.

"I got your message," he finally managed.

She nodded. "Remember the last time we were in a water pipe lounge, Demascus?"

"Um, not really."

She frowned.

"But seeing you here, Madri, and smelling the tabac—it's like a word on the tip of my tongue that I can't quite place."

"You might be telling the truth. You might be lying. I expect it's the latter, based on how things ended for me back in Halruaa."

Demascus cast his gaze down at the table. They'd been through all this under the rock fall. Madri wasn't inclined to believe he was different. Still …

"Then why'd you save me?" he asked. "You could've had your revenge. A life for a life."

Madri smiled for the first time. His breath caught. He remembered this woman, if only in flashes and moments. And he *had* loved her.

“It wouldn’t have been *my* revenge, would it? I wasn’t the one who tried to crush you under an island.”

“So you saved me, just so you could personally kill me?”

She smirked, then shook her head. “No, I’m joking. The old you would have gotten it. Maybe you *are* telling the truth, Demascus.”

“I swear by all the gods of light and shadow, I’m not the same person who murdered you. *I* could never do that.”

Madri stared at him. Demascus measured the time in uneasy heartbeats. What was she thinking? Probably that he was a no-good lying sack of rat feces. Or that—

“All right, Demascus.”

“All right? Does that mean you believe me?”

“Let’s just say … I’m willing to peel back my hate enough to try and believe you. Though your words are not the reason why I’m willing to give you even this much of a chance. Come with me?” She stood up. “I’ve got something to show you.”

Madri made for the exit. Demascus clambered to his feet.

“Something to show me?” he repeated stupidly.

“It’s back at my place. I think you’ll find it … illuminating. I did.” Madri walked out. The large oaken door slammed in his face.

He pushed it open and rushed out into the light. He was relieved to see she was waiting for him on the street. Demascus cleared his throat. “This has all the hallmarks of a trap.”

She shrugged. “You’ll never know unless you come see. Besides, give me some credit. I think I could whip up something a little less obvious, don’t you?”

“I suppose,” he allowed. Except that if she *was* planning on leading him to his demise, subtlety clearly wasn’t necessary.

They walked side by side through the city. Madri seemed utterly real, as solid as the cobbles below and the towers on either side. But people failed to see her, or if they did notice,

their gazes slid from her like water off a greased skillet. Demascus thought about taking her hand, just to see if she was as solid to the touch as she looked. But her rigid posture and frowning demeanor made him think better of it. Either his hand would sink through her because she *was* a ghost or she would slap him. So he settled on worrying about what she had planned for him.

They didn't make good time. Madri hesitated at street corners, and looked around a lot as if she was constantly losing her bearings.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Normally I just appear where I want to go. I was terrified when it first happened. But it's turned out to be pretty handy."

"I bet."

"So this is the first time I've had to *walk* anywhere in this crazy place. What brought you to Airspur anyway, Demascus?"

"The choice wasn't entirely in my hands."

He related how he'd found himself in the country of Akanûl, sans any real memory of his past, as they wound their way through the cliff-face metropolis. He explained how his enemies had been very much aware of him, and how close he'd come to becoming just one more incarnation in a long line that'd been killed by someone called Kalkan Swordbreaker.

"Kalkan," said Madri, nodding. She stopped at the front gate of a manor house walled in white stone. The mansion was ostentatious enough to be a noble's residence. Indeed, it looked exactly like …

"This *is* a trap!" he yelled, jumping away from the wall. The manor house was where they'd run Kalkan to ground last time. He drew *Exorcessum* in its lone-blade configuration and put some distance between himself and Madri. A carriage driver who'd been making his way down the street at a leisurely pace saw the deva with the naked

glowing rune blade. The driver pulled sharply on the reins and turned his conveyance around.

Demascus shifted his gaze from the wall-top to the retreating carriage, and then to the opposite side of the street. If Kalkan was waiting in hiding, the ambush was blown. He was ready.

“No, Demascus, I told you. It’s not a trap.”

“You’re in league with Kalkan,” he accused. “This used to be his home. He hunted Airspur citizens for food from here. And hunted incarnations of *me* from here, too.”

“Well, all right. Yes, I began as an unwitting ally of Kalkan. True. But I didn’t think I had a choice. When I realized differently, I quit. I saved you, didn’t I? And I’m done following Kalkan’s script. From here on out, I make up my own future.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her voice had started low; now she was nearly screaming. “It means that *I* don’t like being manipulated. I did something about the one who tried to chain me with lies. But you, you’re such a trusting fool, you’ll accept whatever a random divine avatar tells you, without wondering whether you’re doing good or ill. No, the Sword of the Gods operates above such ordinary constraints, right? It’s what you must tell yourself so you can sleep at night!”

Demascus frowned. Madri was right. That was exactly how the Sword operated. His fragmented memories told a tale of privilege and power, one that didn’t involve too much reflection. As if his station automatically lent his decisions legitimacy. He’d been caught up in his glory, his own importance. Lying to someone like that would probably be easy …

Madri might be telling the truth. “All right, let’s not get distracted by my shortcomings. Believe me, I’m well acquainted with them. Tell me more about why you were working with Kalkan. You’re claiming you were, what,

brought back into the world by the rakshasa? Kalkan called forth your spirit to do his bidding?”

She shrugged. The tension went out of her shoulders and face. “Something like that. Because of our connected past, and because you killed me, we share a psychic connection—maintained or at least influenced by Exorcessum. The first time you changed its configuration, I felt it. The … mental shackles Kalkan used to chain my spirit fell away. I became myself again. That’s when I decided it was time to do things my own way.”

“Was that before or after you stole the Necromancer from the Norjah gallery?”

She gestured to the house. “Come find out.”

“Burning dominions,” said Demascus. What should he do? He didn’t seem to have much of a choice. Shaking his head at his own gullibility, he followed her up the walk to the entrance. One of the two massive oaken doors was ajar.

Madri said, “I normally don’t enter this way—I can flicker in and out of the cellar with a thought. But I’m pretty sure that this door is usually closed.”

Gouges around the lock showed where the door had been forced. “Someone’s broken in,” he said, pointing out the marks. “Recently.”

Madri flickered and was gone.

Demascus charged through the door, hyperaware of the possibility of an ambush as he crossed the threshold. The last time he’d been there, he’d followed Riltana up the grand stairs to a second-floor suite. They’d found evidence of Kalkan’s crimes laid out in maddening detail in a collage of sketches, skinned genasi corpses, and a magical gate to a secret mausoleum, which proved to be Demascus’s own grave. *Exorcessum* had waited there for him, too. And ultimately, Kalkan himself, who’d crowed about leading the deva around by the nose through a series of incarnations.

Demascus had killed the bastard rakshasa, even as Kalkan Swordbreaker laughed about how everything was all going

according to plan.

Kalkan *should* still be dead. But … with the Necromancer in play, all bets about death, reincarnation, and the circle of life for mortals, devas, and rakshasas alike were up in the air.

Nothing attacked him. The house remained quiet as a grave. Where to? The suite upstairs had been thoroughly cleaned by peacemakers months ago, and the portal stones removed and stored in his own domicile. And Madri had mentioned a cellar.

He hustled through a series of mostly empty rooms on the ground floor until he found the door to the basement. He thudded down the stairs. Below, things were even more abandoned looking. But calling the series of rooms a “cellar” would be a stretch.

Then Demascus saw a door-shaped hole in one foundation wall. Flinders of broken wood littered the floor around it. A maul lay discarded to one side. He crept to the opening. Crooked stairs plunged down a narrow shaft. A sour smell wrinkled his nose. Down he went, taking the steps three at a time.

Madri was in the lantern-lit chamber at the bottom. But so was …

“Jaul?” said Demascus.

The youth stood at the edge of a pile of damp earth. A painting draped with red velvet was clamped under one armpit. In his free hand he held a burned and half-broken mask.

“Demascus!” said Jaul.

“By all that’s holy and sovereign, what’re you doing here?” said Demascus.

“You gotta help me!” Jaul pleaded.

The deva looked at Madri. Confusion made his tongue feel thick.

“He’s trying to make off with the *very* thing I was going to show you, the thing that could tell you how you’ve been duped! And that dirt pile your friend is standing on … is

dangerous. It's strung round with defensive wards. I'm surprised the little idiot hasn't already triggered one."

Jaul looked from Madri to Demascus with fearful eyes. His arm clamped tighter on the painting under his arm. "The painting isn't hers—she stole it first!"

Tensions in the low-ceilinged chamber were too high for Demascus. He sheathed his sword. "Everyone calm down. Let's not rush into anything one of us might regret later. I just want a few answers. Starting with you, Madri. The kid's got a point. You stole that painting from House Norjah."

"That doesn't matter anymore. I don't really care about the painting, only its knowledge. It knows things things you need to hear, Demascus."

"Such as?"

"Such as what happened to me, and to you, when I was alive."

"Can't you just tell me?"

"You need to hear it directly from the Necromancer's lips. That's why I asked you here. And now this thief is trying to make off with the painting."

"Well, we did agree to return it to House Norjah," Demascus admitted. Though he was still confused how Jaul had managed to track down the painting so quickly. It didn't make any sense.

"How'd you find this place, Jaul?"

Jaul swallowed and glanced around the room as if looking for another exit. An odd reaction, to be sure.

"Jaul, where's Chant? Is he part of this?"

" 'Part of this?' " repeated Jaul. The young man's eyes darted between Demascus and the exit.

"Yeah, returning the Necromancer to Kasdrian. I can't figure how you beat the rest of us to the painting, but I assume that's why you're down here?" He let the question dangle, like a fishing line.

"Right! Right. I was … I just thought I'd get a jump on things, you know?"

The scroll charm braided into Demascus's hair shivered. Great—a lie. Why was the kid telling tales? They'd already caught him red-handed. Maybe that was all it was—Jaul was worried he'd be reprimanded for acting on his own. It didn't seem like a nicety the kid would care about, but he'd underestimated Jaul in the past.

"He's not taking the painting anywhere," Madri said. "At least … not until the Necromancer tells you what it knows, Demascus."

"You'll allow us to take the painting? If I agree to talk to it first?"

Madri slowly nodded. Demascus was surprised. He wondered if the Necromancer itself was a trap Madri had prepared for him. Maybe she'd primed the entity trapped in the canvas to cast a death spell or steal his soul with a whisper. Who knew what was possible for a demigod? Certainly Madri had reason enough to get revenge. It could even be why she'd saved him from the mine collapse—so she could deliver him to her true retribution here in this hidden cellar, in the very house where Kalkan once plotted against him.

"And it's going to tell me what?" Demascus asked.

"It's going to tell you how your precious office has been manipulated. How fate itself was denied—altered—for the selfish gain of an evil entity. And how you were the instrument of that alteration."

Goose bumps swept his arms. That was a considerable claim. "Someone manipulated me? Who? Just tell me!"

"You won't believe me." She folded her arms.

Demascus realized he wasn't going to escape the cellar without speaking to the painting. It might be a setup, sure. But he had to know.

He looked around to Jaul. "Well, how's that sound? Are you willing to let me have a look at that thing before you cart it back to House Norjah?"

“Yeah, sure. Of course!” Palpable relief loosened the muscles of the young man’s face. He began to set the painting down.

“Get down from that first, why don’t you?” said Madri. “It’s dangerous.” She pointed at the small hillock.

Jaul sidled forward, leaving a clear boot print in the dirt. Demascus wondered what had Madri so spooked about heap of soil. She wasn’t telling him something. Which was worrying. Maybe he’d ask the Necromancer about that, too. A bonus question.

Jaul leaned the painting against the cellar wall. He played with the broken mask in his hands, nervously transferring it from hand to hand. Madri raised a hand and opened her mouth as if to tell Jaul something, but Demascus was already uncovering the canvas. The portrait was made up of disparate scenes stitched together with embalming thread. Each pane was a tiny vista of undeath, agony, and sundered sanity. And the scenes made up a terrible face. Mismatched eyes swiveled to meet his. The painted mouth heaved against the canvas, as if it vainly sought breath in an airless void.

The Necromancer’s regard was a psychic kick, as Madri had warned. Demascus sucked in a breath. He, or at least his former incarnations, had parlayed with avatars of gods, and perhaps even gods themselves. Though the entity staring at him was the scion of the Binder of Knowledge and a demigod, it was trapped in paint. It wouldn’t cow him.

“Necromancer. What does Madri want you to tell me?”

The two-dimensional mouth squirmed. The painting whispered, “… the Sword is vulnerable to those who can bend Fate, or deceive it with a tapestry of interlocking lies …”

“Explain,” he said, annoyed the Necromancer didn’t just get to the point. What was it about artifacts that made them babble most of the time? The painting was hinting at

something monstrous, but hints could be interpreted any old way, depending on the desires of the listener.

"… sometimes a lie can shift reality, forcing Fate to adjust, instead of the other way around …"

"Yes, yes. That sounds very fancy. Just tell me: who's lying?"

"*I* can tell you that, Demascus," said a new voice, one whose depth and clarity sent shivers down his spine. "Turn, face me."

Demascus looked round.

Madri had clapped her hands to her mouth and was pointing at Jaul.

The boy wore the burned half-mask.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE CITY OF AIRSPUR, AKANÛL
22 LEAFFALL, THE YEAR OF THE AGELESS ONE (1479 DR)

"HELLO," JAUL SAID. "I NEVER GET TIRED OF IT, HOW vivid the world is through living, mortal eyes." The mask's mouth was moving, but the voice was not Jaul's.

"Fossil?" said Madri, her voice quavering. "Is that you?"

"Just so," Jaul's mouth quirked, in perfect lock step with the half-mask's rubbery contractions.

Madri whirled to fix a scared gaze on him. "Demascus, the mask was a dead angel; I thought I destroyed it!"

Jaul—no, Fossil—shook its host's head. "You almost did. But you should have destroyed *all* the pieces."

"What've you done with Jaul?" Demascus asked. If anything happened to Chant's son … Demascus didn't want to think about it. His friend would never forgive him.

"Jaul?" said Fossil. "He's not far, nor as pure as you assume. I can see right into his mind." A hand rose and tapped Jaul's forehead. "In fact, why don't I let him tell you what he's been up to?"

Jaul spoke again, but this time in something much closer to his regular voice. "Hey, Demascus. Yeah … I've been sort of a bad boy." Then he giggled.

It sounded like Jaul … but a Jaul hyped up on about five kettles of tea. "Take off the mask!"

"Nah. I don't think so. I'm seeing things a whole new way."

"Because you were stupid enough to put an evil relic on your face. It's messing with your perception. Take it off!"

Madri interrupted, "Jaul, what did Fossil mean when he said you're not so pure?"

Jaul laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Fossil meant the Necromancer. I wasn't actually going to return the painting to House Norjah. I just said that because you caught me. No, I've been keeping Master Raneger apprised of everything you've been up to. See this tattoo?" Jaul pointed with one hand at a tattoo on his opposite wrist, depicting a dagger suspended in a crashing wave. "It's Raneger's sign. Means I'm pledged. I told Raneger about the Whispering Children while you were off chasing drow in the Demonweb. He was *delighted* to learn about the Necromancer. So he sent me to steal it. And you know what? I was happy to do it. Serves the old man right if House Norjah comes looking for him."

Disappointment on Chant's behalf stabbed Demascus. It was plausible … and explained how Jaul had found his way here. Raneger's sizable criminal network had supplied the address. The little snot had betrayed them. And now Jaul had been snagged by something even worse than Raneger.

"Fossil, let Jaul go!" Demascus said.

"Fossil isn't doing anything I don't want it to do," said Jaul. "*I'm* the one wearing the mask, you dolt."

"Try to take it off then, and we'll see who's got who."

"You think I'm that stupid? Go piss in a dragon den."

Demascus *had* hoped Jaul would at least try. He edged forward. If he could jump the kid, maybe he could wrench the mask off him …

"Hey, watch it. With this thing on my face, I don't miss a thing. And I can tell you're going to do something stupid. Don't, or you'll be sorry."

"Sorry how?"

"Sorry that you didn't learn all the secrets this relic mask knows about you because you made me too angry to share. Fossil said it could see into my head? Well, I can see into what passes for its mind, too. And you figure prominently."

Jaul raised his hands in a gesture of reconciliation. "I know things you need to know."

“Such as?”

“Such as the true origin of …” Jaul cocked his head, as if trying to recall a half-forgotten fact. “… of Kalkan Swordbreaker. He wasn’t always your nemesis, you know. He was created after you manifested in Toril.”

“How do you know that name?”

“Fossil knows,” Jaul said, smiling like the drake who ate the cat.

Madri murmured, “Demascus, Fossil is a liar and works for a liar. Anything he says might be—”

“Created by whom?” interrupted Demascus. Madri scowled at him. Anger made him not care about her feelings—she should have warned him about the mask!

“By the gods,” said Jaul … but the voice was no longer that of Chant’s son. The intonation had returned to that of the relic angel. Fossil continued, “They feared you, a creature with a mortal’s mind-set from another continuum. An entity who’d been granted more power than a being of your station should ever possess. So they fashioned a keeper, one who could manage you, and then snuff you out whenever your power grew too great. To reset you, as it were, and rub out any particularly embarrassing memories you might carry that could implicate even a god.”

“That’s preposterous.”

“Is it? The pantheon of Toril faced enough problems—the last thing they needed was an assassin whose power, at its height, might be sufficient to remove a god from the holy rolls. Or whose intimate knowledge of their private vendettas could be used to shake up earthly temples.”

Demascus shook his head. He couldn’t imagine that a version of himself could ever be so powerful that the gods would fear him. Although …

In several visions of former incarnations, he had to admit he’d felt … calm, sure, and at peace with what was essentially an unstoppable capacity to harm others. He’d been more than human, like a demigod given mortal form.

His pale skin, marked with jagged patterns, set him slightly apart from others, but the grace and certainty that suffused his every word, his every movement, might as well have been … divine. When he was moved to action, godlike power had flowed through him to smite his foes, and sometimes it felt as if the eyes of a god looked out from inside his skull …

"They're using you, Demascus!" pressed Fossil. "They don't care about you. You're a tool to them, one they deliberately keep blunt. They don't deserve your service."

He recalled his attempt to contact Oghma, and how he'd been rebuffed. Already angry, new resentment burned like a fire in his belly. "What're my options?"

"Don't listen to it!" Madri protested. "It's a servitor of the Prince of Lies!"

Prince of Lies? That was dramatic. The name sounded familiar, though. But she'd had her chance to tell him herself. She hadn't. "I'll hear it out, nonetheless."

Madri gave an exasperated sigh. "Don't be an idiot, Demascus!"

Jaul smiled. "Your best option," said Fossil's voice, "the most ethical option, really, is to learn all the terrible things the gods of Toril have asked you to do over the centuries. I am the doorway through which you can gain that knowledge. All you must do is join me. Do you think murdering Madri was the worst thing you've done in the name of divine justice? You'd be wrong, Demascus. So very wrong."

A chill ran across Demascus's limbs and some of his anger evaporated. "Join you? What does that entail?"

Demascus reflected that the mask probably didn't have his best interests at heart. Its very first act in the deva's presence had been to mentally dominate Chant's son. And the title, Prince of Lies … something about that name swam forward in his memory, trying to break to the surface. Something to do with skulls.

“It’s simple, really. You’re a deva. When a deva decides to seize his *own* destiny and break free of the moral shackles that so many bear, he gains a great boon. Such a deva takes on a new, fiercer visage.”

Demascus felt his jaw literally drop. He knew what Fossil was getting at: when a deva renounces his moral code, at his next incarnation he returns as a fiend, not a man. He comes back as a rakshasa!

“More important,” continued Fossil, “such a deva *finally* remembers all his previous lives, all his triumphs, and all the abilities he’s learned through the ages. If you join me, Demascus, I’ll give you all your memories back *and* all your power. Kalkan will no longer be your nemesis but your ally. And you’ll be able to take your vengeance on the gods who’ve reduced you to such a sad, forgotten cinder of your former glory.”

Demascus slowly nodded …

“Why’re you nodding?” Madri said, her tone incredulous.

“Actually, I just remembered where I’d heard the title ‘Prince of Lies’ before,’ ” he said. “The Prince of Lies is the formal title for a god named Cyric.” The floor seemed to drop beneath his boots.

The painting stirred again. “Cyric, the Prince of Lies, god of Strife, seeks to court your next death … Just as his deceits caused you to kill where you would not have otherwise …”

Madri interrupted. “You killed *me* because of a lie, Demascus.” Her eyes shimmered with unwept tears.

Oh, no. It would be nice to think the Necromancer was mistaken. But that was the logic of a three-year-old. Close your eyes and hope the scary things go away. He tried one more time, anyhow. “Fate is a power greater than the gods.” Wasn’t it?

The painting kept speaking. “… you imagine gods and men writhe in equal futility against Fate’s decree … but Fate is only inertia … one may always change one’s own destiny,

or another's, if one tries hard enough …" And then the Necromancer's awful tones faded to nothing. Was it possible? Could Cyric have denied Fate by contracting the Sword to slay Madri with a lie? Was such a thing possible, even for a god? Maybe not all gods, but possibly one whose sphere of influence was duplicity. A liar god could probably bluff the universe itself …

Demascus felt raw and sick with the sudden certainty of it. All the lives he'd ended, all the bodies discarded to rot—how many had been true selections of Fate? And how many had been murders he'd been duped into committing? His brain convulsed around the name: Cyric. He saw a jawless skull on a purple sunburst. Then another piece of former knowledge surfaced: The Prince of Lies was trapped!

He protested, "Faerûn's pantheon imprisoned Cyric in his throne. He's bound. How can he lie to me, or to anyone?"

The Necromancer's tombstone voice rang out again. "Demascus killed Madri a lifetime ago, before the Prince of Lies was so chained … Cyric foresaw his own captivity … he set in motion a plan to forge a key, a weapon with powers that eroded in each cycle of death, powers so deadly even a god might fear its reach … Cyric sought to turn you to his own ends and make the Sword of the Gods that weapon with a lie …"

"That's one way to look at it, painting; the wrong way," said Fossil. "But sometimes a lie is a tool, a means to an end. In this case, it was a gift. A gift designed to return to you all your forgotten power and full self-knowledge. The lie made you kill Madri unwittingly. But now you know. And if you embrace what you've done, now that you possess full knowledge of the significance, you can cast off your manacles."

Horror made Demascus's scalp tingle. He knew what Fossil was going to suggest. It was terrible. And yet …

"Claim the act, make it your own without remorse! Then return in your next incarnation as a rakshasa, with power

beyond imagining, knowing all the gods' secrets in this world and in others. Join Cyric, and you'll shake the foundations of the cosmos!"

The raw power Fossil offered woke something in Demascus: the echo that lived like a splinter in his soul. The Sword had heard the angel's offer. It wanted to return in full measure, clothed in its old glory but not yoked by the Whorl of Ioun to the gods' will. He was halfway there already—he'd already lost the Whorl. All he had to do was to embrace his dishonorable deeds. A rush of grim joy sparked up his spine, and he grinned. His eyes fastened on the heap of earth. Under there lay the seed of the Swordbreaker's new body.

"What of Kalkan?" he said.

"Having achieved his end, he'll trouble you no more." said Fossil.

"You *can't* be considering his offer!" accused Madri.

Demascus ignored her. He—or was it the Sword of the Gods?—wouldn't allow Kalkan to get off so easily. The rakshasa had killed him more times than he knew. And once Demascus regained all that had been stripped from him, he'd remember every death. He doubted he'd be feeling generous toward the Swordbreaker then. His grin stretched wider. Then he imagined the furred, bestial monstrosity of Kalkan. And of the bodies Riltana had once shown him upstairs, stripped of flesh, hanging to rot as if in a madman's larder.

Is that what he wanted for himself?

Yes, answered the echo. His hands worked as he imagined loosing bolts of heavenly ruin and shadowed glory in equal measure. As he wielded *Exorcessum* in every one of its configurations, even the last, the configuration that could burn everything to ash …

The sour odor of the dirt heap drew his eyes again to Kalkan's makeshift chrysalis. Madri made a quiet sound of negation.

He blinked rapidly and took a quick breath. Merciful lords, what was *wrong* with him? He would *never* submit to becoming a monster.

Never.

The specter of the Sword trembled, then folded itself away like a soot-winged moth in the recesses of his being.

Demascus cleared his throat. “Rakshasas are fiends. They might as well be devils.”

“Don’t belittle what you haven’t tried,” said Fossil’s voice. But Jaul’s mouth pulled down in a worried frown.

“It’s telling that you want me to trade my flesh for something like that. Forget it. I’d never willingly become like Kalkan. Your plan has failed.”

Jaul’s frown grew thunderous. He stared at Demascus for a long moment. Then he said, still in Fossil’s voice, “So be it. I hoped you’d choose wisely. But no matter. The hook is well set. Ignorance of your crimes doesn’t guarantee a pardon. If you die now, with the knowledge of your lover’s murder a fresh stain on your soul—”

Jaul’s body leaped into action, daggers suddenly in hand. He thrust one at Demascus’s abdomen, the other at his face. The half-mask cackled with glee. Jaul’s glee, not the mask’s!

Shadow take it, thought Demascus as he stumbled back, I’m not—

Madri interposed herself. Jaul flashed through her like smoke. But he reacted as if he’d thought she was real. He flailed, and landed clumsily at Demascus’s feet.

He was up again a half-heartbeat later, daggers already thrusting again.

But the deva used the moment’s grace to raise Exorcessum. He deflected the new attacks, then push-kicked Jaul.

Jaul gave ground, but only grudgingly. Demascus smashed the flat of his sword on the kid’s head. He didn’t want to kill Chant’s son, only stun him. The impact vibrated up the hilt,

and he worried that even though he'd turned the blade, it'd still been too hard. That blow had probably brained the—

"Is that all you've got?" said Jaul. "I'm not going down. The mask's given me resilience and speed—I'm as powerful as the angel it once was! You'll have to call up the echo of the Sword, Demascus. Then we'll discover if he agrees with your decision!"

Was Jaul correct? If I take on the visage of his old office, will my choice be overturned? The Sword knew little of remorse and hardly cared for repercussions. It *might* decide to join with Fossil and Kalkan. Demascus recognized the incipient glimmer of the Sword's abilities trying to subsume his thoughts. He clamped down on the feeling. No, you're not getting out.

Jaul advanced, calm as a snake. Blood dribbled from his scalp into one eye, staining it scarlet. But it didn't seem to bother him. Demascus backed up, blade raised in guard. Jaul followed. A wall touched Demascus's shoulder. Jaul slashed with the dagger in his left hand at the same instant. Demascus ducked into what he hoped was a blind spot of blurred vision caused by the pooling blood in the youth's eye. *Exorcessum* cut into the meat of Jaul's left arm. The hand holding that dagger spasmed and a red-handled dagger clattered to the floor. More blood flowed. Demascus used the moment to sidle away from the wall.

"That one's going to leave a scar!" crowed Fossil. "Not that *I* care. You're going to have to kill this body, Demascus."

"Wait, what?" came Jaul's near instantaneous response from the same mouth. "That's going a little too far, Fossil."

Fossil replied, "Don't worry, it won't come to that. With my help, you can defeat the deva, if he doesn't call his office."

"Yeah, the way I feel, I doubt *anything* can stop me. But what were you saying about Demascus having 'to kill this body?' "

"If Demascus does *not* raise the Sword, you'll kill him with the power I've given you," explained Fossil. "If he *does* raise

the Sword, the Sword can probably kill you … but the Sword will decide to join us instead. Do you see?”

Jaul slowly nodded. “I do, Fossil. Let’s end this!”

Gods of shadow, thought Demascus, Jaul and Fossil had him by the privates!

If he could just—

Jaul head-butted him. The sharp mask edge gouged Demascus’s forehead. His heel caught a chair leg. He cursed his ineptitude as he toppled, reflexively letting go of his weapon to catch himself. He came down like a collapsing accordion, ducked a knife swing, and reached for the hilt of his sword—

Jaul stamped on his hand. Pain swarmed up his nerves like fire ants. The boot ground his palm into the floor, fixing him in place. The masked face regarded him. “Where’s the Sword? He wouldn’t put up with this sort of nonsense.”

Demascus flinched as something terrible beat at the gates of his mind, trying to emerge. Fossil was right. The Sword of the Gods didn’t like being humbled. He grunted with the pressure of holding the figurative door shut.

“Are you keeping him bottled?” came the dead angel’s voice. “Yes? That means I’ll just have to cut your throat and bleed you like a pig. When you see me next, it’ll be through different eyes. But you’ll remember me. Keep that in mind when you come into your true power, Demascus. I was the one who birthed you!”

“Fossil, Jaul, over here,” came Madri’s voice. She stood on the earth heap, which was disturbed as if a human-sized gopher had been digging in it. Something lay revealed there, like matted fur …

Madri waved a dirt-encrusted metallic disk that dangled from a leather strap.

The boot’s pressure eased. “Put that down,” Fossil said, its voice emotionless.

“Let Demascus go,” she replied. “Or I’ll flicker to the middle of the Sea of Fallen Stars and drop the *damos* into its

depths.”

Damos? thought Demascus.

“You’ve one chance, Madri,” said Fossil. “Do as I say.”

“You better do what it says,” Jaul agreed. “Fossil’s not messing around.”

Demascus tried to snatch his hand from under the boot. But the mask continued to lend Jaul’s mortal sinews angelic strength. Strength he couldn’t hope to match without calling up the power clinging to his soul.

“Not happening, Fossil. Let Demascus go. Now.”

“You should have listened,” said Fossil. “I release you, spirit. Be gone. The binding I summoned you with is dissolved!”

“Wait,” said Madri. “I don’t …”

The woman shuddered. She reached a hand to Demascus, as if in supplication or a plea for aid. Then she blew away like smoke from a snuffed candle.

The *damos* thunked onto the mound.

Jaul laughed. “That was easy. Stupid woman. I warned her.”

“You killed her,” Demascus said, the words mushy in his mouth.

Madri was gone. Sorrow like a glacier pinned him on its face. He gasped, trying to catch his breath. He forgot the pain in his hand; the cold despair that engulfed him was heavier, and threatened to crush him.

Jaul’s throat chuckled with Fossil’s glee. “She was already dead. Though I admit, she had more agency than I expected for a ghost. Something to do with Exorcessum, I expect. Ah, well. She’s out of the picture. As you’re about to be. I look forward to dealing with the incarnation that follows this one.”

Demascus wasn’t really listening. The forlorn way Madri had reached for help … It tore at him, pulling him out of the numbing regret.

And something cracked. Through that fracture flowed a scream for vengeance.

The lantern light turned red as blood. Jaul's voice slowed to a bass rumble.

The Sword of the Gods jerked his bruised hand from beneath the trapping heel, ignoring the scraped flesh that resulted. Jaul didn't react. He couldn't; he was caught in the regular flow of time. The deva retrieved *Exorcessum* and stood as shadows congealed around him, drawing close like a second skin, highlighting older, crueler lines in his face. The Veil of Wrath and Knowledge flared behind him like angel wings. *Exorcessum's* runes lifted a quarter inch from the blade. The Sword was well past tired of Fossil's charade. As time tottered toward its resumption, he used the sword's point to scribe a mark of divine radiance on the mask's forehead. His oath to destroy Fossil.

The half-mask burned suddenly blue as Jaul flashed into movement. He sidestepped the deva's blade and circled out to the left. The Sword pivoted, but one of Jaul's daggers was already arrowing at his kidney. Fossil had sped up Jaul's reactions, beyond anything the boy should've—

The dagger punched through the Sword's camouflaging shadow, through his coat and leather armor, and scraped across his ribs. It would've punctured an organ if one end of the Veil hadn't whipped forward and slapped Jaul across the face. The kid rocked back and the deva used the distraction to step through shadow to appear on Jaul's right flank.

But Fossil had already turned his host to face the Sword's attack, as if it could see into the Shadowfell fringe where the deva could usually evade notice.

Fossil beat aside a disemboweling lunge by *Exorcessum*. With the same movement, Fossil skimmed one of Jaul's daggers along the outside of the rune sword and caught the deva's arm in a twisting lock. The deva reversed his grip and forced Jaul to abandon his ploy.

Fossil was good! The Sword loved it when his foes forced him to walk along that knife's edge between victory and defeat—it happened all too little. In fact, the Sword couldn't ever remember losing. Because when he did, the Whorl of Ioun never recorded it.

He laughed. The sound echoed through the room and into the Shadowfell fringe, too, creating a spooky resonance that would usually make mortals gasp in alarm. Jaul just smirked and kept attacking. The young man's body had become a mere tool, a possessed husk in the angel's control, windmilling daggers and hurtling back and forth through the air so quickly his clothing threatened to smoke with the friction.

The easiest way to hurt the mask would be to obliterate its host.

The Sword wondered why he hadn't already slain the young man. Why was he holding back? Because he, the deva … knew Jaul? And … valued him? His father, at least. Hard to believe—an assassin should never form attachments. Better to keep others distant and unimportant. And besides, the little bastard had lied about returning the painting to House Norjah. No, he'd come to betray the deva and his own father and hijack the Whispering Child for Master Raneger. On top of everything else, Jaul had stupidly put on the mask, and when given the chance to take it off, refused. Really, it'd be doing Faerûn a favor to eradicate Jaul.

Except …

Except he'd received no divine contract to slay the possessed youth. Certainly he'd killed those who'd tried to prevent him from fulfilling past contracts. But something about his current situation was different, making him hold back even though he'd already decided it wasn't in his interest to do so.

"Burning dominions, you vex me!" the Sword said. He addressed himself—that annoying part that'd gained a little

too much of its own agency lately, the part that thought of itself as Demascus, even though that was the Sword's name, too. Like Madri, the Demascus part of him didn't seem to know its role.

He took a single step through a writhing shadow to the top of the stairs. Jaul was already after him. The deva grabbed a fleck of shadow and hurled it at the mask. Jaul flinched back, much farther than the Sword had expected, so much so that the swing he'd planned to intersect the distracted mask wearer at the neckline just whiffed through empty air.

Right. He already knew Fossil could see the echo plane of Shadow, with its twisted, dark swirls of gray and black murk that beat like rain from a leaden sky. Which meant Jaul could, too …

Argent light flashed from the mask's eyeholes, sweeping the chamber and stairwell. It incinerated the deva's protective shadows to dust, burned him, and dazzled his sight. He clamped his eyes shut.

"Guide me, Veil," he muttered, and charged blind down the stairs. His scarf settled across his eyes. The chamber's dimensions returned to him in smudges of gray and white.

Jaul was visible, but in the fate-strained vision of the Veil he appeared only as a vague outline superimposed on an eight-foot-tall humanoid with metallic black wings. The creature swept across the entire chamber, wearing armor like crusted ice dipped in tar and a face like a blank tombstone.

No wonder I'm getting my ass handed to me, thought the Sword. Jaul's channeling the revenant of an angel of vengeance, or something worse.

He rolled under another discharge of radiant energy from the mask's slit eyeholes, holding *Exorcessum* parallel to the floor in one hand so he didn't snag himself on its lethal length.

Then he gathered up the swirling umbra of the Shadowfell in his free hand. He'd used shadow as a weapon many times,

forming it into implements of death able to cut or sever. But he couldn’t recall ever using it as a distraction.

He loosed the gathered shadow as if shaking out a rug. A wave of gloom rippled toward Fossil, a wave invisible in the world.

But Jaul saw it. He flinched away, uncertain what the discontinuity represented.

The deva was ready. Behind the cover of the collapsing wave front, he stepped between shadow mouths. He heaved *Exorcessum* around in an arc so swift the air screamed its protest. He began the stroke across the room from Jaul but completed it a few paces from his foe. Already retreating before the gloom wave, the kid still managed to jerk back again, away from the deva’s surprise sword stroke. He flinched just far enough so that instead of taking off Jaul’s head, *Exorcessum’s* sword tip dragged along the half-mask, snagging it and then stripping it from the young man’s head. The mask smashed against the damp brick wall of the cellar. Fragments exploded across the chamber like shrapnel.

Jaul collapsed. The deva remained poised for a long moment in the quiet cellar, his Veil-enhanced senses alert to every possible threat. But none remained, save maybe for the painting …

He flipped the cover over the fractured visage. The shards of Fossil were devoid of any lingering power. Jaul was halfdead with the strain imposed by the angel’s supernatural strength being ripped away, though the deva judged he’d probably live. The heap of earth glimmered with a threat returning to full strength. And Madri …

Well, she was gone. Back to the dust she’d been for a century or more. The guise of the Sword whispered away.

Demascus cried out and shuddered. He removed the scarf from his eyes and glanced around the room lit by failing lamplight.

“Oh,” he whispered. “Madri.” She’d saved him. She’d sacrificed herself and saved him. “I didn’t deserve you,” he told the blank spot of earth where she’d last stood. Misery reached for him. He pushed it away as best he could. There’d be time for that. First …

Demascus retrieved the *damos*. His lip curled at a hint of something vile smelling. He secured it to his belt.

He turned his attention to the pile of dirt. With bare hands he began uncovering a corpse. A corpse that was becoming a bit less dead each day.

EPILOGUE

City of Airspur

25 Leaffall, the Year of Ageless One (1479 DR)

"So I quit," said Chant, finishing his story. He held out his mug to Riltana for a refill.

The thief poured ale from a clay jug. She and Chant had appeared at Demascus's door at dusk. She'd wanted to celebrate. Chant wanted to air some grievances. Both were concerned about how he was doing.

Demascus sipped his own ale. It was lighter than he preferred. But drinking beer-flavored water with friends was a damn sight better than what he'd originally planned for the evening—morbidly watching the pile of dirt he'd transferred from Kalkan's manor anddumped in a hastily constructed vault beneath his home.

"I'm going to reopen the pawnshop," said Chant. "That, and disentangle my secrets network from Master Raneger's. And make certain that crazy fire mage Chevesh has forgotten all about—"

"And what about Jaul?" prompted Riltana.

Chant paused, then shook his head. "I don't know. The reason I took up at Raneger's in the first place was so I could pry that bastard's hooks out of my son. But I did exactly the opposite. I need to try a different tack."

"Jaul lied to you—to all of us—and tried to steal the Necromancer for that fat watersoul," said Riltana.

The human pinched the arch of his nose.

Demascus hadn't wanted to tell Chant about finding Jaul with the Whispering Child. But he owed his friend the truth. He *had* refrained from explaining how Jaul had apparently relished his betrayal, how he'd seized on the strength

offered by Fossil as an excuse. Instead, Demascus had spun the truth and explained that Jaul had hosted a possessing spirit named Fossil. He'd said that Jaul couldn't help doing the things he did while he wore the mask.

Demascus wondered if he should tell the whole story. But when the kid regained consciousness, he claimed ignorance of the previous twenty-four hours. Perhaps Fossil's presence proved so traumatic Jaul's memory failed. It must be true, because Demascus's lie-sensing charm hadn't indicated otherwise. On the other hand, the angel had been a servant of the Prince of Lies, and Jaul had borrowed that power. If anyone could lie well enough to befuddle Oghma's charm, it was someone touched by Cyric's power.

Chant shook his head, bewildered. "Jaul's wild. The more I try to build bridges, the farther I push him away. I think the best I can do is to leave him alone and let him find his own way."

"He'll come around," said Demascus. Or he might not, he didn't say. He knew families sometimes came apart at the seams for less. Whatever happened …

Demascus realized he'd never trust Jaul again. He decided not to tell Chant that, either. Instead, he reached out and scratched Fable under the ears. The cat responded by redoubling its contented purr. He wondered if Chant would ask for his pet back once his shop opened. Probably. The thought of losing his house companion wasn't a happy one.

"So you finally returned the painting to House Norjah?" said Riltana, turning to Demascus. By her tone, he knew she was feigning disinterest.

"Yeah. I'm no genius, but why make a clan of vampires mad at you. Better they owe *us* a favor."

"That seems at odds with your normal approach," said Riltana.

"What's that?"

"Falling face-first into the shit, making it worse by doing exactly the wrong thing, then getting out of it by swinging

around your stupidly large sword. Well, right after a nap, of course."

He laughed. Good friends were a treasure, and Riltana and Chant were worth more than gold. He was lucky they were part of his life. Though the painting was still on his mind, despite the fact that he'd returned it to Kasdrian Norjah. He couldn't untangle the significance between the Whispering Children, Oghma, Cyric, and himself. He knew he probably wouldn't like it if he ever managed to figure it out. But so far Oghma remained mute and unreachable on that topic, and every other.

He supposed it could be a coincidence. People tended to remember unlikely co-occurrences and forget every other moment of their lives, which were far more numerous but didn't involve any kind of coincidence. But as Sword of the Gods and an "agent of fate," he'd come to see nearly everything as having some sort of deeper connection. Maybe that outlook was a liability he'd have to overcome. Sometimes bad things just happened in life. What was important was what you did next.

"And what about your friend, the one you had the queen write to?" Chant asked the windsoul. "Good news?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Riltana's skin reddened and the corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly. "Something like that," she said. She brushed back the crystalline strands of her hair, looking embarrassed.

"Oh-ho, come on, you're holding out on us!" accused Chant.

"Carmenere wrote me. She said she got the queen's letter and that she's been doing some thinking. And she said … that she missed me." Riltana smiled, and Demascus couldn't help echoing her expression.

"Good for you!" he said. "This time, amaze her with a whole new you, one that doesn't steal every interesting painting she sees." The moment the words left his mouth,

Demascus regretted them. If anyone could take some ribbing, it was Riltana. Under normal circumstances. But by the way her eyes narrowed and her nose pinched, he knew he'd hit her where she was still vulnerable.

"Sorry," he said, "That was meant to be funny."

Riltana shrugged it off and took another drink. "I know. Sorry. You'd think I could learn a lesson. First, the queen mother's portrait. Then a talking burglar that led to a piece that looked like it was painted with a torturer's cast-off scraps. If you hear me start talking about portraits again in any context, slap me."

Demascus nodded. "Count on it."

They all chuckled.

"And promise you'll do the same for me if I suddenly start telling you about some new heinous crime I only just remembered."

"Deal," said Chant. They all toasted.

The beer was tasting better, he noted. Maybe he'd been too harsh. The watered-down flavor had a certain familiarity to it that was almost friendly.

"What're you going to do about that thing in your new vault?" said Riltana.

"Study it," he replied. "It's Kalkan. He's returning to life—though it looks like he's actually got a fair bit to go."

He wrinkled his nose, recalling the smell and the half-formed body reknitting itself. If he hadn't known otherwise, he'd have thought it was about a two-month-old corpse.

"Burn it, why don't you?" said Riltana.

"I may. But if I do, Kalkan will still come back somewhere—and I'll have lost him. This way, I'll know when and where he returns to the world. And then I can ask him about Cyric."

"Hey!" said Chant, "I know—why not trap him? Put the remains into some sort of sealed chamber, one only large enough for you to drop down food and water. He'll never get out …" The pawnbroker trailed off. Then he shook his head,

“Nope, he could just kill himself, then reincarnate somewhere else. Sharkbite, I thought I—”

“Strap him down tight as a drum,” interrupted Riltana. “He won’t even be able to snap his fingers, let alone kill himself. Maybe have him committed to the asylum. Keep him blurred out on drugs and ‘restrained for his own safety.’ ”

Demascus scratched his chin, “You know, you might be on to something.”

She grinned and offered another toast. “To me! The smartest!” He and Chant obliged.

There *is* a way, he thought, to determine for certain if restraining Kalkan was the right thing to try. The *damos* would know. The artifact contained the Voice of Tomorrow. But if he tasted that forbidden font, he’d probably die himself. Which seemed counterproductive. Either way, he’d have to think about what to do with the Imaskar relic, too. For now, it shared the vault with Kalkan’s body.

“We make a damn fine team,” said Chant, his words a little slurred from the quantity of ale he’d poured down his throat.

“Hells, yeah!” agreed Riltana. “We found that crazy drow hiding in the mine, even though all of Akanûl’s intelligence apparatus was certain Tymanther was responsible. If it hadn’t been for us, they’d have gone to war with the dragonborn, and Chenraya would’ve been laughing up her webbed sleeve.”

“Well, Queen Arathane is part of Akanûl’s power structure,” said Chant. “She was right there with us. We should’ve invited her over tonight. You would have liked that, right, Demascus?”

Demascus smirked. “Yeah, why didn’t you think to ask the monarch over for some beer? I’m sure she gets tired of all that elven wine they serve in the palace.” Besides, there wasn’t anything between him and Arathane save a few looks, maybe a wink or two, and probably a lot of signals he’d misconstrued. “But with Madri’s destruction,” he

continued, “I don’t really …” He finished by just shaking his head.

Chant clapped him on the shoulder but didn’t have any words. None existed. The thing was, Demascus didn’t really know how he should feel. Madri had sacrificed whatever existence she had for a person she hardly knew—he wasn’t even the same Demascus who had slain her. Well, not really.

Riltana rose, lost her grip on her mug, and only managed to catch it with a lucky swipe. “It’s late! We should let Demascus get to bed—then maybe he won’t be so prone to snoozing when he should be hacking.”

The deva was pretty sure that joke had run its course five tellings ago, but he smiled anyway.

Chant staggered to his feet and finished off the last of his ale. He slammed the mug down on the table and said, “We’ll come back in a few days and help you decide what to do about Kalkan. How’s that sound?”

“See you then,” Demascus replied. “Bring more of this beer because it’s growing on me.” He showed his friends to the door. When they’d gone, he stood in the foyer for a bit, enjoying the quiet and the way the lamp shone on the polished wooden boards of the floor and the newly whitewashed walls.

Fable’s meow broke the mood.

He returned to the great room, gave the cat a treat, poured himself the last of the ale, and took the stairs to his rooftop balcony. The night was cool and cloudless. The city lights tumbling away down the cliffs made it hard to see the stars, but the moon and its train of smaller companions marched across the sky.

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt so relaxed. Maybe in a previous incarnation? He chuckled at the possibility.

Demascus dropped into one of the stools around the table. The game of tiles he’d set up for him and Riltana to play was still ongoing. In fact … The thief had made another play.

HAUNTED. She’d used all her letters, and arranged the tiles across triple wands. He counted up the score and frowned.

“Damn.”

He’d lost again. Odd that Riltana hadn’t mentioned her victory below, especially with Chant there to hear it. The windsoul wasn’t a humble sort.

And when had she come up to make her winning move? He’d been on the balcony before Riltana and Chant had come over. haunted hadn’t been there then. Something wasn’t—

Demascus looked up into eyes like distant storm clouds.

“Madri?”

“Care for a rematch?” said the ghost.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Demascus (da-MASS-kus)

Demascus is a deva, which means he's had hundreds of mortal incarnations, if not thousands. He's fulfilled the same role in many of those lives: Sword of the Gods. Or, in more colloquial terms, a divine assassin. However, something's gone wrong, and the continuity of his identity and abilities, maintained in a ring called the Whorl of Ioun, has been lost. Where that leaves Demascus is a question he struggles to discover, even as enemies he can't recall continue to wind him into their webs. Though he doesn't have the Whorl of Ioun he has three tools recovered from his previous incarnation: the scarf-like Veil of Wrath and Knowledge, a lie-detecting scroll-shaped charm, and the sword Exorcessum (ex-OR-kes-um).

Riltana (ril-TAHN-ah)

Riltana is a windsoul genasi who makes a living stealing from Airspur's elite and wealthy. By day, she's a messenger in the Airstepper's Guild. She once stole a painting from the palace of the queen, and thus lost the love of her life. Riltana schemes how to recover the painting and thus (she hopes) to repair the damage she did to her relationship.

Chant Morven (CHANT MORE-ven)

The portly proprietor of a pawnshop in the city of Airspur. Besides selling the hopes and dreams of Airspur's desperate and destitute, Chant also heads up a network of informants that keep him apprised of events in and around the city. Thanks to the enmity of a fire mage called Chevesh, Chant has been forced to take employ with Master Raneger, the city's most successful crime lord.

Jaul Morven (JAHL MORE-ven)

The estranged son of Chant Morven. Jaul is aged eighteen winters, and to show his independence from his father, has taken up employment with Raneger, the owner of the Den of Games. Now that his father is also an employee, the two have made some strides toward making up, but Jaul's independent streak may prove too jagged.

Queen Arathane (air-WRATH-ah-nee)

Akanûl is ruled by Queen Arathane (in partnership with four Stewards). Arathane is considered a just ruler, and so she strives to be. However, she's learned that the Stewards, while also interested in seeing Akanûl remain prosperous, are also sometimes given to wild ideas, an overarching fear of neighboring states, and a sometimes paralyzing instinct to retreat into bureaucracy in the face of danger, or worse, draconic measures in the face of too little evidence. Thus, from time to time, Arathane finds it convenient to secure assistance from unofficial channels. Such as Demascus, who's shown himself to be not only very effective but also mysterious.

Madri (MAD-ree)

Demascus recalls a woman with "eyes like distant storm clouds," whom he knew in a former life. He fiercely regrets her death. Except it may be that she has somehow come back, either as a ghost or as a memory generated and given life by Demascus himself. Either way, she is not happy with the deva and wants revenge for the way he mistreated her.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Carmenere (kar-men-AIR)

An estranged friend of Riltana and a relative of Queen Arathane. Carmenere is a disciple of the moon and a respected silverstar. Carmenere recently took a diplomatic post in the distant land of High Imaskar.

Chenraya Xorlarrin (chen-RAY-a zo-LAR-rin)

A drow matron of House Xorlarrin with an interest in waking or gaining control over primordial relics, in answer to a challenge given to the drow by Lolth. Chenraya formed a partnership with Lord Pashra to find and retrieve a powerful relic she believes is in Akanûl.

Fable (FAY-bel)

Chant's pet cat, which is currently staying with Demascus while Chant's pawnshop remains closed.

Fossil

A reanimated relic of a dead angel serving an imprisoned god. Fossil is partly responsible for bringing Madri's spirit back into the world.

Master Raneger (RAN-eh-ger)

The owner of the Den of Games. Many suspect Raneger is a powerful crime lord in Airpsur. He's involved in many more shady deals than even those who know his proclivities realize. He's popularly believed to be a high elf, though few have ever met him face-to-face.

Lord Pashra (PASH-rah)

An oni who worships primordials. He will do anything to see them roused in Toril. He’s even willing to ally with the drow Chenraya Xorlarrin.

Kalkan (KAL-kin)

A rakshasa—once a deva—who became a beast to serve as Swordbreaker, a leash on Demascus’s power should the Sword of the Gods ever grow too strong. Kalkan bitterly regrets his transformation and blames both Demascus and the gods for his lot. He has fallen in with a powerful divine benefactor who gave him a *damos*, a device that allows one to hear prognostications of the future from the Voice of Tomorrow but kills most users in the process. Which turns out not to be a problem for a rakshasa that reincarnates just like a deva after each death, but unlike a deva, retains a memory of every foul deed he or she ever committed. And every foul plan he or she ever put into motion.

Necromancer, The

A painting so terrible to behold that viewers actually risk convulsions upon seeing it revealed. The Necromancer is an entity trapped in canvas, but its powers remain great and available to those who are willing to risk the portrait’s awful visage.

Kasdrian Norjah (KAS-dri-an nor-JA)

The head of House Norjah, a merchant house in Airspur. House Norjah is presumably unique in the nobility of Airspur in that it is made up almost entirely of vampires and those who hope to gain the blessing of the blood. It is also unique thanks to Kasdrian’s special art collection, including several paintings that can talk.

Lady Ascension

Lady Ascension is a powerful vampire agent of the Twisted Rune, working on retainer with Kasdrian Norjah at the insistence of her undead masters. What interest the Twisted Rune has in Akanûl is a question for speculation, but it seems that Kasdrian and the Twisted Rune are more allies of circumstance than of ideology. In any event, Lady Ascension doesn't display any particular respect for Kasdrian's role in Airspur.

Captain Thoster (THAWH-stir)

Captain of the ship *Green Siren II*. Thoster is generally considered to be without conscience but not without his own peculiar sense of honor. He often boasts his blood is "unclean," but merchants in Airspur trust the man because he's never lost a cargo even when threatened by pirates or predation by the Abolethic Sovereignty.

Voice of Tomorrow

Enigmatic divine force that can apparently see the future as easily as the past.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce R. Cordell is an Origins and ENnie award-winning game designer whose long list of professional credits include the *D&D® Gamma World™ Roleplaying Game, DARK SUN® Campaign Setting, FORGOTTEN REALMS® Campaign Guide, Prince of Undeath™*, and *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead™*. Bruce is also an author of Forgotten Realms novels, including the Abolethic Sovereignty series and the Sword of the Gods series. Find him online at www.brucecordell.com.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I used to wonder where authors got their ideas, and how they turned those ideas into a story stretching 80,000 words or more. Then I became an author, and through brute experience, learned it myself. Save up funny ideas and odd thoughts, and when the time comes to convert ideas into a story, set daily deadlines. Sounds easy, right? Let’s pry that apart a little bit.

Ideas are seeds, which you can collect against later need. Ideas can come to you any time, but usually seem to do so while you’re watching TV, taking a shower, talking to a friend with a funny story, exercising on the treadmill, or sometimes even while you’re trying to brainstorm interesting ideas. It doesn’t really matter when or why—if the idea makes you think, “Cool!” then it’s an idea worth saving.

When you’ve got time (preferably during a week away from your day job), plant those idea-seeds, tend them as they grow into an outline, and see what blossoms. If you plant enough seeds in the same place, you’ll end up with a garden.

But here’s the thing. Sometime while your garden is growing and you’re laying down the paving stones, chapter by chapter, you’ll suddenly see a connection you hadn’t planned for, hadn’t anticipated, and hadn’t even realized you needed. It’ll rise out of the ground like the foundation of an ancient ruin that’s been there all along. You’ll marvel at its beauty and symmetry, and wonder how you could be so lucky.

Of course, good luck isn’t usually random happenstance like some people imagine. Luck is actually the ability to first recognize and then take advantage of opportunities that come your way, in life and in writing. A writer “lucky”

enough to find hidden connections between characters, events, and plot is actually a writer willing to take chances on exploring opportunities (or experiences) that fall into his or her lap. And thus I come to my inspirations for *Spinner of Lies*. The character of Demascus was already part of a story arc introduced in the preceding novel, *Sword of the Gods*. That said, unexpected elements in the novel drove the story forward in entirely unforeseen ways, great and small. Those elements include the water-pipe lounge, Madri, the angel relic Fossil, and the drow who tries to steal the arambarium "motherlode."

Another unexpected element were the Whispering Children, as most awfully personified in the novel by the Necromancer. Here's how this particular idea-seed came to me.

My friend Torah and I went to see a Picasso exhibit. We didn't have any experience with Picasso's paintings, and we were excited to see his work. The museum was packed with others who apparently felt the same. All of us were excited to see "one of the greatest and most influential artists of the 20th century."

But a creeping sensation grew with each new section of the exhibition we visited: I didn't like these paintings. Each piece was a brick of oppression and unease that taken all together built an ugly edifice. My disquiet culminated when we entered a long room dominated by several cubist-style portraits. They looked to me like pieces of shattered corpses randomly sewn together in a mockery of life. I hated them.

As we left the museum and discussed our reactions, it hit me: What if paintings like the ones we'd just seen were so terrible, not because an artist was able to manifest ugly emotions on canvas, but because (when translated to the realm of magic where *Spinner of Lies* unfolds) such paintings were prisons of individual demigods, trapped in their own portraits, each one revealing the aspect of the caught entity?

Who might have the power to trap demigods in paintings, and why would they do so? Would the paintings grant any special powers or pose any particular dangers to those who viewed them? If such paintings existed, who'd collect them? Maybe they'd be scattered, except for a few special curators who knew to look for them and gather them in secret, so that when treated properly, these paintings would be like tutors for those with the fortitude to listen to their horrid whispers:

> … [The painting] could just barely be described as a face. The multitude of shattered portraits, jammed together to form a single entity abiding in apparent unceasing agony, met her gaze with mismatched eyes. Its gaping mouth was like a wound. The frozen vista of paint snared the visage in cruel brush strokes.

So that's the story. The exhibition and my reactions to it were the inspiration for the Whispering Children. The incorporation of the idea changed the novel by creating completely new opportunities for the characters to explore. Plot arcs sprouted in the "garden" of my outline and draft that I hadn't previously anticipated, rippling through the entire narrative.

—Bruce R. Cordell

BACKDROP: SPINNER OF LIES

Explore the history and geography of the novel’s settings—exclusive to this ebook edition!

Necropolis of the Sword

By Bruce R. Cordell

Illustrations by Vincent Proce

My novel *Sword of the Gods* includes a scene where the characters Demascus and Chant discover a portal to a mysterious destination, and Demascus knows that his enemy Kalkan has recently fled through the portal.

When Chant and Demascus decide to follow Kalkan, they find a strange new place—the lost necropolis of Khalusk.



SWORD OF THE GODS

The novel *Sword of the Gods* opens with Demascus waking on a cold slab of an ancient altar with no memory, other than the knowledge that someone–or something-wants to kill him. He eventually learns he's got several enemies, one of whom might be the person he once was.

The story features a trip to a subterranean mausoleum city of undead, where Demascus hopes to corner one of his foes, find his missing weapon, and maybe learn the secret so important that he tried to keep it from himself.



www.swordofthegods.com

NECROPOLIS OF KHALUSK

Khalusk is a buried crypt city forgotten by most of Faerûn. Exuding an air of decay and necrotic ill will, the necropolis encrusts an island located deep within a subterranean vault, surrounded by the overflow from a sunless sea.

Finding and accessing Khalusk is difficult; the city was constructed by paranoid Netherese arcanists to serve as a secret sanctuary. Nevertheless, Khalusk has seen occasional visitors over the last several hundred years—adventurers, lured by references to the city in ancient texts, who availed themselves of approaches created by natural earth movements or tunnels dug by Underdark miners.

History

The ancient civilization of Illusk persists as little more than crumbled fortifications and shattered towers scattered throughout the city of Luskan. In -354 DR, the same year the Netherese arcanist Melathlar sacrificed himself to

erect the Hosttower of the Arcane on the surface, his elder sister Khaela founded a secret subterranean colony to the northeast, hoping that it would prove a final hidden redoubt against the onslaught of the phaerimms—evil aberrant mages bent on the destruction of all life in Faerûn.

For many years the colony thrived, thanks to the magical expertise of Khaela and her children. It was not to last: As Khaela's long life threatened to fail, she fell into madness and began to fear divine magic. Her anxiety drove her to seek the aid of outlaw clerics and other divine casters to keep the gods from learning of her secret stronghold.

With her health and mental stability eroding, Khaela resorted to necromancy. After drinking from a dark cup called the Bleak Grail, she entered undeath. Unfortunately for the rest of Khalusk, because Khaela's magic was inextricably tied to the city and its populace, the effects were felt by all. Within a single hour, every living creature in Khalusk died. Three days later, they rose again, undead.

That was two thousand years ago.

The Vault

The necropolis of Khalusk has a simple layout: A great gulf of dark water surrounds the lone island on which the city rests.

A damp, cool breeze, smelling of earth, swirls around the perimeter of the immense chamber. Along the vault's edge, small caves and fissures above the waterline provide vantage points overlooking Khalusk. The island is made dimly visible by the luminescent fungi and faded magical runes lining the wide catacomb mouths along its edge. The fallen remains of the necropolis's ancient majesty loom over its entrances like a crown of broken spires.

Near the overlooks, a bank of pocked black rocks provides access down to the water's edge. There, a collection of watercraft of varying design and complexity lies pulled up on the shore.

The boats are kept in passable repair by a golem named Tharbas, Khalusk's ferryman and guard. Constructed mostly of goliath parts, the golem is authorized to grant or prohibit visitors the use of a boat.

DEMASCUS AND THE NECROPOLIS

The deva Demascus keeps his modified mausoleum in a lost colony of Illusk beneath Faerûn. An earlier incarnation of Demascus bargained with the undead lords of the necropolis for a secret place of rest. If Demascus's incarnations are slain, they re-form inside the sarcophagus there.

Demascus's connection to his mausoleum in Khalusk has apparently been disrupted, because his present incarnation re-formed in Akanûl, a nation far to the southeast.

Sea of Khalusk

Ice-cold water surrounds the island, filling the cavern to unknown depths. Wavelets ripple across its surface, driven by the ceaseless wind circling the vast chamber.

A population of undead fish and other aquatic creatures swim the chill sea (nothing escaped the necromantic effects of the Bleak Grail). However, the real threat to visitors is the murder of undead crows that occasionally flies from one of the island's cave mouths to fill the air above the water.



Crossing the water in a boat with oars requires seven rounds of hard rowing. To progress, one character per boat must succeed on a DC 25 Athletics check or a DC 25 Endurance check each round. Alternatively, two characters can

succeed on DC 17 Athletics checks or DC 17 Endurance checks each round (both checks must use the same skill, however).

USING THARBAS

Tharbas takes his duties seriously, and he will deny boat access to any creature or group that he doesn't like or that he judges to be a danger to Khalusk. On the other hand, enough coin will convince the dour golem to show visitors to a serviceable boat. He will not ferry the party members and, depending on his mood and attitude toward them, he might neglect to mention the water's dangers, such as the undead crows that sometimes patrol the air above the dark waves.

The crows appear on a d20 roll of 1-10, or if summoned by Tharbas, and attack any living creature on the water. The flock cannot be destroyed, but it can be driven off briefly if the characters deal enough damage to its members. The only way to escape the crows' harassment, however, is to cross to either shore.

Murder of Crows	**Level 9 Hazard**
Terrain	XP 400
Detect Perception DC 5 **Immune** necrotic, poison, psychic	Initiative +7
Resist half damage from ranged and melee attacks; **Vulnerable** 5 radiant, 10 against close and area attacks	
STANDARD ACTION	
† Deathless Talons (necrotic) ♦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee special (creatures on the sea); +12 vs. Reflex *Hit:* 2d6 + 10 necrotic damage.	
Special: On its initiative count, the murder of crows makes the above attack against each living creature on the Sea of Khalusk.	
COUNTERMEASURES	
♦ **Drive Off:** If the murder of crows takes 100 damage, it breaks off its attack for 2d10 rounds, after which the crows descend and resume attacking. There is no limit to the number of times the crows can attack or be driven off.	

Island Cliffs

Anyone crossing the water to the island must choose between two routes to the necropolis: the gaping catacomb mouths or the steep cliff faces. Scrutinizing the rock walls (Perception DC 20) reveals a few sets of narrow, rambling stairs offering easier ascent to the island surface. Adventurers can also scale the walls by succeeding on a DC 20 Athletics check.

Island Cave Mouths

The wide cave mouths surrounding the island were created by Khaela as part of the city's magical defenses. If Khalusk were ever attacked, the holes could expel great gouts of water that would strike with the force of battering rams. These fountains of fluid would scour the air of enemies, then rain down on the waters below, generating enough turbulence to repeatedly smash any creature or craft into the sea floor.

BLENDING IN

Quick-talking characters can convince an undead denizen to act as their guide, but it won't be easy (Diplomacy DC 25). City dwellers that aren't overcome by the desire to eat party members will nevertheless suspect that the characters are either phaerimm spies or thieves here to disturb the Mausoleum of the Sword (which the undead have agreed to guard). Finding a guide will help the characters blend in among the undead.

Characters might try to disguise themselves as undead (Bluff DC 20). Coating themselves in rotting remains so that they don't smell alive offers the best chance of success (+2 to the Bluff check) and of traveling through the city with the fewest difficulties.

The Lords of Khalusk have lost the command phrase that triggers this effect, although each hopes to recover it to use against the others if circumstances ever warrant doing so. Following their abandonment as weapons, the caves have been claimed as roosts by the undead crows.

The Necropolis

Looking inward from the edge of the island, visitors see a jumble of smashed gravestones, tilted memorial spires, rusted plaques, and half-collapsed mausoleums. Here and there, larger structures—great walls, arches, and spires—reach toward the cavern's vaulted ceiling. In the streets, corporeal undead shamble and stumble. Sharp-eyed observers might notice that a few move with a purpose and alacrity not shown by their simple-minded compatriots.

Although many undead citizens are mindless, most retain some memory of their original lives, and quite a few remain as acute today as they were before being plunged into undeath. The smartest and most ambitious undead are the so-called lords of Khalusk (see below).

Columbarium-Guarded Lanes

Many of the necropolis's cobbled streets are lined with crumbling columbarium walls. Within these rotting ramparts stand urns in dark niches. Other burial vases lie shattered and strewn across the way, ashes spilling from their mouths.

Walking these lanes can be dangerous for living creatures, with or without a guide. Wraiths haunt the urns containing the remains of their former bodies. The luckless soul who disturbs these restless apparitions has two options: destroy them, or flee the island. The former choice, assuming it is possible, will draw additional unwanted attention from the Khalusk natives.

Lords of Khalusk

Several "lords"—undead that have enough power and allies to claim the title—hold sway in the necropolis. No official charter defines rules for governing the city or resolving disputes; when the lords quarrel, the argument is decided using swords and spells of exorcism.

Characters who impress a lord or agree to do a job for that individual might receive a token that grants them, for a brief period, permission to travel the city unmolested by the dead. But because the lords of Khalusk are not big on cooperation, carrying the token of a particular lord granting safe passage does not guarantee one's safety where the other lords are involved.

Although the number of lords fluctuates, more than twenty typically vie for control. A few named lords and their interests are described below.

GUARDED MAUSOLEUM

Demascus's arrangement with the Lords of Khalusk stipulates that the entire island city will guard his mausoleum's location from intruders. Adventurers could slip into the mausoleum, however, despite the numerous undead patrolling the necropolis. Such sneaky visitors would find the mausoleum unguarded-but not free of perils.

One of Demascus's foes has set a magical sensor in the chamber. Inscribed among the countless symbols on the sarcophagus, it is nearly impossible to notice (Perception DC 30). If the lid is moved, a rakshasa assassin appears 1d4 rounds later and attempts to kill Demascus or any intruders it finds. It approaches its task subtly, using deceptive veil to assume the appearance of a humanoid in need of aid. Once the target's guard is down, the assassin strikes.

Turam the Cold: A layer of ice sheathes Turam's skeletal body, except for his head, which burns with a chilling black flame. A court of freeze-dried ghouls serves the frigid noble. In exchange for the warmth of a living soul, Turam will grant one favor.

The Arcanist: This ghostly female has no court and manifests infrequently. She wields impressive magical abilities, however, and some whisper that she is the shade of Khaela herself. The Arcanist aids those who reveal a secret to her—but if she judges the secret to be worthless, she claims a life instead.

Lord Ralmarth: This bulky golem, composed of equal parts flesh and stone debris, insists on being addressed as "Lord." Ralmarth patrols the city with his golem-hounds, which, like him, are rough assemblages of rubble and reanimated flesh. Deeply paranoid, he assumes that every visitor is a phaerimm spy.

Doryx: A tinted glass jar, three feet in diameter and five feet tall, holds the pickled, animated remains of the alchemist Doryx. Foreseeing that Khaela's sip from the Bleak Grail would end in disaster, he attempted to preserve himself, but was only partially successful: Doryx is not undead in the traditional sense, but the alchemical soup that keeps him active and thinking is certainly not natural, nor has it preserved his sanity. His court consists of homunculi and constructs, because he detests the undead. Doryx is a determined enemy of the Arcanist (whom he believes to be Khaela's ghost), and he seeks the location of the Bleak Grail, which he hopes can reverse the city's devastation.

Mausoleum of the Sword

The most direct way into Demascus's secret redoubt lies in a plaza separated from the surrounding gravestones by black iron rails. Climbing through a hole

in the cobbles at the plaza's center drops visitors into the main chamber of the mausoleum.

The tomb is tiled in black stone and magically lit by four iron candelabra, one in each corner. A shallow pool with fish skeletons scattered across its bottom dominates the floor. A tunnel exits the chamber at one end of the pool. On the opposite end lies an enormous sarcophagus.

Layer upon layer of designs cover the sarcophagus, with newer symbols overlaying older carvings. Gauntlets, shields, leaves, orbs, eyes, stars, anvils, skulls, and moons stand out among the motifs—known symbols of the gods of Faerûn, both current and past. Other markings evoke no set meaning in Toril, for they are symbols of the gods of other worlds.

These words are inscribed on the stone face of the sarcophagus: "Agent of Fate, Emissary of Divine Judgment, Cutter of Destiny's Thread. You died as you lived, and you will live again, Demascus, Sword of the Gods."

The sarcophagus usually lies empty. Every so often, however, the regenerating body of Demascus appears in it as a not-quite corpse; rotting in reverse, it becomes more and more alive until, at last, the deva's new incarnation steps forth.

When Demascus appears, so do his implements: a great-sword called Exorcessum, bedecked with red runes down one side and white runes down the other; a collection of small charms; and a long, animated scarf known as the Veil of Wrath and Knowledge. A ring called the Whorl of Ioun, Demascus's main continuity bridge between incarnations, also manifests.

Demascus can channel incredible power from these implements. In the hands of another (such as someone who manages to pilfer them from the mausoleum before the deva's latest incarnation opens his eyes), these magic items are potent, if less so. Treat them as noted below.

Exorcessum: *+3 luck blade*

Veil of Wrath and Knowledge: *+3 amulet of protection*

Scroll-Shaped Charm: *headband of perception* (level 11, substitute Insight for Perception)

Whorl of Ioun: *premonition ring*

EXPLORE AIRSPUR

Brightest of the Fallen Stars

By Matthew Sernett

illustration by Adam Paquette, Empty Room Studio
cartagraphy by Sean Macdonald



None who have seen it can think of Airspur without envisioning its heights. Its sun-baked streets wind switchback paths down the bright cliffs, its steep stairs cut nearly vertical ascents between buildings, and its suspension bridges arc between earthmotes high overhead. Titanic pillars of stone rise from the sea to the level of the land above, and gleaming elemental spires hang with crystalline clarity all throughout Airspur.

Those fortunate enough to have visited also remember Airspur as a city of colors and lights. The yellow cliffs tower above an astonishingly blue part of the Sea of Fallen Stars. Cobalt and golden roofs set off pale sandstone structures with gaily painted doors and shutters. Genasi of different hues—each tattooed with glowing lines—promenade in vivid fashions and glittering jewelry. Monolithic crystals, the elemental spires that drift in the air, refract the sun’s light

during the hot and lazy days and shed colored glows over vibrant nights of wine and dance.

It’s no wonder many consider Airspur the most beautiful city in all Faerûn, nor do they question how it earned its moniker as the Brightest of the Fallen Stars.

AIRSPUR’S STORY

Airspur existed as a city-state on the border of Chessenta and Chondath, sometimes allying itself with the other city-states of Chessenta and at other times siding with Chondath. While not initially threatened during the Year of Blue Fire, Airspur saw massive destruction in 1386 DR as the Toril’s sibling world of Abeir replaced much of the nearby landscape. A huge crevasse opened in the city and the sea moved. Those who did not die fled.

Meanwhile, Abeir brought with it most of the genasi nation of Shyr. Long dominated by a primordial named Karshimis, the genasi were free to determine their own destiny. They founded the city of Brassune among the blended ruins of the Chondathan city of Rath and Shyr. An initial period of collaboration between the largest families led to nearly two decades of infighting. The Covenant of Monarchy finally resolved this conflict by causing the noble families to elect a line of royal succession.

The first king of Akanûl was a savvy windsoul genasi named Zavon. His reign ended in the cataclysmic assault of Brassune by the Abolithic Sovereignty 50 years ago. This left his daughter, Queen Cyndra, with the duty of repelling the aboleth threat and reforming the shattered nation. This she did in the shelter of the ruins of ancient Airspur, displacing the orcs and half-orcs who had come down from the mountains to reclaim the place.

Queen Cyndra then led her people through a renaissance of sorts. She gained the trust and support of the noble families by creating the Covenant of Stewardship and

establishing the Court of Majesty. According to the Covenant of Stewardship, the king's or queen's power could be checked by the unanimous vote of four stewards, who would be elected by the nobles every 10 years. These positions of stewardship in turn carry governmental and administrative responsibilities. Queen Cyndra gained popular support and propelled her state's economy by rapid adoption of new industries suitable to their new lands and the city's location.

Much-loved by her people, Queen Cyndra died of illness, leaving her only daughter to take up the scepter and mantle of rulership as Queen Arathane. Due to her youth and lack of political experience, the first decade of Queen Arathane's rule met with resistance from the stewards and other nobles. Yet in the last 10 years, Arathane has shown that she is an intelligent and magnetic leader, causing even her most determined opponents to give her respect. Airspur today is famed for its beauty, wealth, and the lifestyle of its genasi citizens.

KEY PERSONALITIES AND GROUPS

The beautiful capital of a young and robust nation, Airspur produces many influential individuals and organizations. Some of those important powers are presented here.

AIRSPUR

The vibrant capital of Akanûl, Airspur clings to the cliffs on the east side of a southern bay off the Sea of Fallen Stars

Population: 30,500; another 7,000 live in the nearby countryside. Most citizens are genasi descendants of refugees from Abeir, the majority being windsouls and stormsouls. Small populations of other races live in the city, particularly half-orcs who lived near the ruins of

old Airspur before the genasi rebuilt it. Few dragonborn stay in the city for long due to tensions between Akanûl and Tymanther.

Government: Queen Arathane, a windsoul genasi, has ruled Airspur since the death of her long-lived mother. Four stewards control various aspects of the city, and together they can overrule the queen's edicts. Genasi occupy all important roles of power in Airspur. This is due to the political structure, traditions from Shyr in Abeir, and even outright prejudice (particularly against dragonborn who might be from Tymanther).

Defense: The Airspur defenses are divided between three corps: the Sky Guard, the Ground Defense League, and the Wave Riders. These professional soldiers form the core of its armies and the city watch during peacetime. The rest of Akanûl's military is conscripted from the population, although only a small number of nongenasi are included in the conscript catalogs.

Inns: Shadow of the Rock, Cliffwatch, Spireview Inn, Rang's Hostelry.

Taverns: Seven Stone Steps, The Hook and Eye, The Wind Clipper, The Drunken Gull.

Supplies: Thwaite's Tack and Gear, Gwind's Sundries, Seaside Provisioners.

Temples: None. The genasi of Airspur are uncertain about religion. The difference between gods and primordials or other powerful beings is not firmly established in their minds. Even so, religions of all kinds exist in the city. Priests of real gods and cults of false powers come to Airspur to gain converts, and some achieve results. As yet however, the steward of the Sea

has blocked the construction of large temples that would take up land otherwise useful to the people or the state, and the Steward of Fire has the city watch occasionally check in on individuals of religious bent who might choose to follow a god's edicts instead of the city's laws.

Queen Arathane

The common people of Akanûl consider Queen Arathane strong and fair. She is roundly praised for continuing her mother's policies of state support of descendants of the refugees of Shyr. Even the poorest among the genasi can expect shelter and food.

The nobility have a more complex relationship with their queen. Frequently opposed by the stewards early in her rule, she sometimes chafes under the Covenant of Stewardship and frequently seeks ways to achieve her ends without resorting to the Court of Majesty. The Firestorm Cabal represents one of these tactics.

These privateers are sworn to protect Akanûl, but the group is known to hold Arathane and the stewards in contempt. Arathane tacitly condones their presence and their occasional antics because of their usefulness as a supplement to the nation's defenses and as nongovernmental foil against other nations such as Tymanther. Arathane and a dashing deputy commander of the Firestorm Cabal even secretly pursue an on-again-off-again affair that would endanger both if it became known to the stewards or the leaders of the Cabal.

In addition to friction with the stewards, Queeen Arathane finds herself besieged by suitors and potential matchmakers. The queen is approaching her fourth decade of life, and the question of succession causes a great deal of gossip. Yet the iron-willed Arathane doesn't consider it to be

a pressing issue since both her mother, Queen Cyndra, and her grandmother bore a child late in life.

Adventure Hook: Castan Thellis, a firesoul noble and member of the Firestorm Cabal, has started a rumor that Arathane cannot conceive an heir, and that a suitable replacement should be named immediately for the "good of the people." The player characters are drawn into this conspiracy when they witness a public rally (secretly orchestrated by Castan) calling for the queen to step down, which turns into an outright riot. After helping to quell the disturbance, the PCs are approached by an emissary of the queen, who asks their help in finding out who is behind the rumors. Success at the investigation might even lead the queen to ask the PCs to aid her in arranging a suitable match—a father to the future heir of Akanûl.

Tradrem Kethtrod, Steward of the Earth

The current Steward of the Earth is an earthsoul genasi, breaking the string of watersouls elected to the position. Until Tradrem, no earthsoul had aspired to a higher position than leadership in Akanûl's armies. Coming from a minor noble family, Tradrem feels he has much to prove, and the thoughts behind his earnest face constantly turn to the politics of any given situation.

Tradrem holds Stewardship of Earth, a position in charge of understanding the landscape—both literal and political—in which the genasi find themselves. He heads a group of informants and spies both within and outside Akanûl, and he commands the efforts of surveyors and explorers. Only the monarchs of Akanûl and former Stewards of the Earth have a true understanding of the size, means, and goals of the organizations that the Steward of the Earth controls. The power this provides is nominally checked by the fact that the Steward of the Sky can prosecute any illegal activities, but the queen can overrule any prosecution. Stopping that

edict requires the Steward of the Earth and the other stewards to vote to prevent it. In the few decades since the inception of the Covenant of Stewardship, this system has yet to be tested due to loyalty among the noble houses, but as Tradrem seeks to use his powers to their full extent, he might find that he and the queen have reason to exchange favors.

Adventure Hook: Tradrem is ambitious, even if he does put the security of Akanûl first in his thoughts and actions, and he recently sent a pair of spies into neighboring Tymanther. They were captured, unfortunately, but they hold intelligence that Tradrem considers vital to Akanûl's security. In addition, the two windsoul spies carried a new magic item said to allow its bearer to listen to distant conversations and translate them into Common. Tradrem wants his spies and their eavesdropping devices back, and he is willing to reward the PCs well for their service.

Magnol, Steward of Fire

Magnol, a powerfully built male firesoul, acts as Steward of Fire. This makes Magnol the second-in-command of all military efforts, with the queen being their ultimate leader. Yet peacetime causes his role to look something more like police chief because the armies of Akanûl serve as Airspur's city watch.

Akanûl's army has only a small core of professional soldiers. Most serve as city watch during times of peace, but some make trips to outlying settlements and watchtowers. In times of strife, Queen Arathane calls upon her people to serve as its military. Conscripts have traditionally been drawn only from all able-bodied genasi, but in recent years, Queen Arathane has encouraged the formation of small corps of citizens of other races.

The city watch is divided between three corps: the Sky Guard, the Ground Defense League, and the Wave Riders.

The Sky Guard flies throughout the city on the backs of war drakes. For obvious reasons of safety, most of the Sky Guard are windsoul genasi. The Ground Defense League guards entryways into the city, the Catacombs, the Cliff Prison, the palaces of nobles, and on the streets. Genasi of all types serve in the Ground Defense League, but watersouls and earthsouls are the most populous. The Wave Riders, made up mostly of watersoul genasi, act as the harbor guard during peacetime.

Magnol must work in close concert with the other stewards in his capacity as leader of the armies and city watch. He relies upon the Steward of Earth for intelligence and detective work, the Steward of the Sky for legal authority and prosecution, and the Steward of the Sea for his budget and for dealing with violations of trade and taxation without resorting to arrests and jail time.

The division of power and need for cooperation keeps the stewards in conflict. As they jockey for influence in their overlapping spheres, they go to the queen for arbitration. This gives her power because she can decide matters not just upon the legality or justice but upon political favors the stewards owe her.

This kind of politicking sets Magnol to seething. He considers the preservation and growth of Akanûl the highest duty of all its citizens, and it frustrates him that control of the means to assure that is divided among the stewards and the queen. Magnol would prefer if he or someone he trusts could command it all, but he can’t see a way to achieve that end that wouldn’t weaken Akanûl or throw it into chaos.

Adventure Hook: City militia seized a ship trying to enter Airspur’s harbor without proper authority or paperwork. According to rumor, shortly after examining the cargo hold, a militia captain commandeered a war drake to fly directly to Magnol’s office. The steward then came to inspect the vessel, just as agents of Myxofin seized it from the militia for improperly filed tax documents. The Steward

of the Sea held the ship for no more than an hour, however, before the Steward of the Sky's people claimed the right to seize the ship, asserting that it held a wanted fugitive from justice. Not to be outdone, the earth steward's office also made a claim on the ship, claiming national security was at stake. Now the ship sits in the middle of the harbor, guarded from shore by members of all four stewards, who squabble continuously over its disposition. Shortly thereafter, the queen seized the vessel and stationed her own people aboard. Enter the PCs, who are approached by Magnol to sneak aboard the vessel and acquire a particular cask located under heavy lock and key in the hold. Shortly before they depart, agents of other stewards approach the characters for the same purpose—to seize the mysterious chest. Of course, since they'll be dealing with members of the city militia, Magnol wants none of the guards on the ship hurt.

Lehaya, Steward of the Sky

As Steward of the Sky, this windsoul genasi acts as Lawgiver of Airspur and all Akanûl. Her appointed judges try the cases, and the lawyers that argue them owe their employment to Lehaya. Although this grants Lehaya great power, she has no direct control over who is brought to trial. That's the domain of Magnol and the city watch. Additionally, Queen Arathane's judgment is the highest law, and she can overrule the courts' rulings (although she too can be overridden by a unified vote by the stewards).

In practice, Lehaya exercises only light influence. She avoids using the courts to punish enemies and instead offers leniency to those who can give her advantage. Since these individuals are nearly always nobles, she balances her image among the people of Akanûl by frequently pardoning commoners brought before the court for minor offenses. Her famous mercy has earned her the nickname "Mother Law."

Lehaya avoids making waves in politics and society to help cover her extracurricular interest: the Virushead. The Virushead, a creature that unleashes a dozen deadly diseases with each breath, is hidden away in an earthmote and held in magical stasis to prevent the release of contagion. The genasi captured it in the wilds of Akanûl at great cost, bringing it in stasis and in secret to Airspur under the rule of Queen Cyndra. At that time, it was agreed that the Virushead might be used as a weapon but that it was too dangerous to free from stasis until needed—an opinion with which the current Steward of Fire firmly agrees.

Lehaya sees the Virushead as a powerful weapon against the Abolithic Sovereignty—assuming her mages learn how to control and focus its power. She seeks to develop a disease that affects aboleths and other creatures but leaves genasi unscathed. Yet due in large part to Magnol's security objections, Queen Arathane outlawed experimentation with the Virushead. The other stewards would not vote to overrule her, so Lehaya has resorted to secret projects. Her trusted agents even clandestinely offer rewards for captured creatures they then use in Virushead research.

Adventure Hook: The Virushead has disappeared from its prison, and Lehaya, through an intermediary, approaches the PCs to discover its whereabouts before the plague carrier is turned against the city. To make matters more complex, Lehaya wants the creature returned alive and intact, and failure to do so could earn the PCs the steward's wrath.

Myxofin, Steward of the Sea

Long roads out of Akanûl are few, and none promise safe passage due to bandits and monsters. Almost all business in Akanûl comes through Airspur's port. Farmers in the surrounding countryside send olive oil, wine, fruit, grains, animals, and other goods to the city, and everything else comes to Airspur from the Sea of Fallen Stars.

Myxofin, a male watersoul genasi, oversees the business of the realm as the Steward of the Sea. His agents deal with issues of taxation, gaining building rights for businesses, shipping permits, docking and caravan fees, price fixing, and so on. If it has to do with money, the steward of the Sea is likely involved. This makes the position of Steward of the Sea coveted, and it takes significant investment of capital and promises to secure enough votes to gain the post. Fortunately, the roles of the other stewards as investigators, police, and prosecutors limits the corruption of that election to a level acceptable to the nobles and largely invisible to the common people.

Myxofin is as corrupt as the last three Stewards of the Sea combined, yet he's also smarter. He reaps profits through dummy business, the black market, and Airspur's guilds (both legal and illegal) while at the same time distancing himself as much as possible from their operations. Myxofin skims from the skimmers, and money rarely directly enters his hands.

Myxofin's plans have been so lucrative, in fact, that his success is starting to show. That's a liability that Myxofin can't afford. Also, Myxofin's term will soon end, and he eagerly anticipates enjoying his wealth—something that would be too conspicuous in Airspur. So of course, Myxofin has a plan. His agents have secretly engaged in negotiations with the ambassadors of the nations that currently have embassies within Airspur: Aglarond, Chessenta, High Imaskar, and Netheril. So far, the Shadovar have been the most receptive to his probes, and Myxofin is looking into acquiring a manse in Sakkors—under a pseudonym of course.

Adventure Hook: In his pursuit of property abroad, Myxofin has inadvertently given enemies of Akanûl access to the city. Now, Shadovar agents have struck twice at ships in Airspur's harbor, withdrawing before they can be caught. The attacks have shown an uncanny knowledge of the

workings of harbor militia patrols, as well as the Steward of the Sea's own people. The PCs are tasked by the steward's office to find out who is behind the attacks and how they are always at the right place at the right time. Meanwhile, Myxofin, who knows perfectly well who is behind the attacks, sends rival adventurers to thwart the PCs while he tries to clean up the Shadovar corruption.

Firestorm Cabal

The Firestorm Cabal is an organization of privateers pledged by their leaders to protecting Akanûl. These scouts, mercenaries, and freebooters sporadically guard the nation from all manner of threats on sea, land, and in air. Commoners think of them as champions of the people, but some leaders in the city consider them troublesome rogues, particularly the Stewards of Sky and Fire. In truth, members of the Firestorm Cabal act as both, with many acting more like villains than heroes.

Despite their obvious disrespect for her authority, Queen Arathane ostensibly permits their operations in Akanûl due to their popularity with her people and their ability to supplement the nation's defenses. In truth she secretly employs them in all manner of missions that further her political goals or the good of the nation. For example, the Firestorm Cabal engages in border protection, an activity that takes the form of cross-border raids and robbery of caravans from foreign lands. Queen Arathane sees to it that the stewards look the other way when such attacks benefit her, particularly those that affect Calimshan and Tymanther. The Cabal knows not to impinge on trade too much or to allow a conflict to provoke war. It can count on some protection while within the borders of Akanûl, but beyond it most nations consider the Cabal's members as being outlaws.

The Firestorm Cabal has many safehouses and bases around Akanûl. Airspur, as the most populous area in the country, hosts its Motherhouse. The Motherhouse is the logistical center of the Cabal. Its leaders meet there when not in the field, and the Motherhouse serves as an initial training ground for new recruits.

The Motherhouse hides an increasingly important resource for the Firestorm Cabal. In a secret location behind the cliffs of Airspur, Firestorm Cabal sorcerers study wild magic. Yet their practices don't merely pull from the Elemental Chaos as is the case for normal sorcery. Instead these mages take power from the wild magic caused by the Spellplague. Indeed, the Firestorm Cabal makes many excursions with the clandestine intent of seeking out areas and creatures affected by the Spellplague and studying them. This is an outlawed activity punished by a death penalty, and so the Firestorm Cabal takes great pains to hide their successes (and their failures even more so).

Adventure Hook: In their quest for new sources of magical power, the Firestorm Cabal inadvertently opened a rift to the Abyss. Worse still, a powerful demon on the other side stepped through and prevented the sorcerers who opened the portal from closing it. Now, packs of ravaging demons have begun attacking settlements near Airspur, as well as militia patrols near the city. As more and more powerful demons have come through the portal, the threat grows, and the PCs must enter the well-guarded Motherhouse, make their way past still-hostile Firestorm Cabal members, defeat the demons in the depths of the house, and seal the portal.

Airsteppers Guild

The vertical nature of Airspur makes moving about the city something of a chore, but windsoul genasi can fly short distances and even float down from great heights without

danger. The rapidity with which they can travel led to the formation of a league of couriers called the Airsteppers Guild. While each Airstepper is essentially a freelance messenger, they adhere to the codes of the Guild and wear its signature blue-and-white robes while working. Couriers use their windsoul powers to occasionally fly up levels, across gaps, or over obstacles, and they use them to descend distances safely. The competition to reach destinations swiftly, and the time it takes to renew their power of flight, created a culture of parkouring among the Airsteppers, which in turn has been adopted by the youth in the city. Now genasi of all types and even members of other races scale walls, leap between rooftops, or bound down the levels of the cliffs.

The stewards and the queen employ trusted Airsteppers, frequently hiring multiple Airsteppers to work together as guards or decoys to important messages. The Steward of Earth and the Steward of the Sea both have a great deal of interest in the information traffic of the city, but each has only a few corrupt Airsteppers in his employ. Most Airsteppers follow the Guild’s rules assiduously—rules that include not examining the package or message carried.

ELEMENTAL SPIRES

Gleaming crystal spindles hang in the sky above the city and dip down into the cleft in the cliffs that Airspur occupies. These gemlike monoliths, known as elemental spires, came from Abeir when the worlds combined. Now they glitter in the sky all over Akanul, but a surprising number have collected over Airspur. Like earthmotes, they unfailingly float in the sky, but unlike earthmotes, they drift in small orbits, each moving around its own arbitrary point in space. During the day they dazzle the eye by refracting and reflecting sunlight, but as the light dims they glow of their own accord.

The elemental spires range in size from a dozen feet tall to nearly a hundred feet tall. There are three colors: yellow, orange, and blue. Each color corresponds to a specific energy, and the energy is the reason no one builds on an elemental spire. When a creature or object comes within a certain distance of a spire, it lashes out with the energy associated with its color: fire for orange, cold for blue, and lightning for yellow. The larger the spire, the greater the distance that it lashes out. The residents of Akanul are well aware of the spires' danger and know to give them a wide berth.

Instead of using specific mechanics for all levels of play, you can modify the danger of the spires based on the PCs' level so that the spires remain a threat in whatever adventure you're running. When running an encounter near an elemental spire, decide the distance at which a spire strikes, and roll initiative for the spire. All creatures within the range at the start of the spire's turn are attacked. Roll an attack against Reflex with a bonus to the attack roll equal to the PC's level + 5. Consult the Damage By Level chart on page 185 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide®* and use the medium damage expression for the PC's level.

LOCATIONS

Buildings in Airspur stand in the coves at the base of the cliffs, climb the nearly sheer face of the rock along long inclined roads, stand tall atop earthmotes and pillars of stone, dot the cliffs' edges, and even burrow into the sides of the cleft in which the city resides. Genasi buildings utilize the ruins of Ancient Airspur and accentuate the natural environment in inventive ways, layering the genasis' Abeirian fancies onto the staid columns of old while at the same time

highlighting the beauty of the area. What follows are some of the important areas that exist in this lovely setting.



1. Court of Majesty

The Court of Majesty is the royal court for Queen Arathane and her stewards. It convenes around the top of a small earthmote, with each of the five thronemotes floating just above it and around its edges. Those coming to court climb up from a central stair carved in the earthmote and accessed from below by a bridge from a lower earthmote upon which stands the Queen's Palace. The Court of Majesty is left open to the air, but in heat or inclement weather, poles and cloth shades are raised. Queen Cyndra set up this court to put the rule of Akanûl in plain view of the people (particularly the nobles). Queen Arathane would prefer to do without the formality, but the stewards oppose breaking with tradition because the open-air court puts their influence on full display.

2. Street of Cerulean Hues

This long highway snakes along the top of a cliff south of the city that overlooks the Sea of Fallen Stars. It's famed for its breathtaking view and the breakneck fall to the rocky shore an unwary person can experience. The wide cobbled street owes its existence to old Airspur and the empire of Chessenta rather than the travel needs of Airspur's current residents. Although used by some farmers and merchants, the street is dominated by inns and the pleasant villas of the wealthy looking to have a little more room and a fine view. The Steward of the Sea keeps a palatial second home along the road where he entertains and hosts important guests to the city.

3. Darkled Depths

Shadowed by cliffs and a low-hanging earthmote, the dripping neighborhood known as the Darkled Depths gets little direct sunlight and acts as the industrial hub of the city. The earthmote above it wells with water that flows over its sides, and a clifftop stream falls down toward the bay. The genasi harness the force of both of these sources of water to fill aqueducts and power mills. Due to the noise, shadows, and dampness, the Darkled Depths serves as home to some of Airspur's poorest citizens. Many nongenasi live in and around this area due to subtle pressures of prejudice and suspicion.

Adventure Hook: A recent spate of burglaries targeting some of the city's wealthiest nobles have been tracked to the Darkled Depths. Captains in the city militia are hesitant to send their own troops into the city, so the PCs are hired to find out who has been terrorizing the city elite and put a stop to the robberies. Strangely, the poor residents of the Depths seem unwilling to cooperate. Is this thief a Robin Hood of sorts? Someone with a grudge against the nobility? Or someone with a darker agenda in need of funding?

4. Plaza of Leaping Fountains

Located on an earthmote that serves one of the two causeways between the cliff sides, the Plaza of Leaping Fountains hovers several hundred feet above the bay in the most vibrant entertainment district in the city. The open square hosts many fountains that spout water over the walkways, arcing above the heads of revelers and filling the air with cooling mist. Named for the engineering of its fountains, the Plaza is famous for the shops, taverns, inns, and cafes that line it and the nearby streets. If something of note happens in the city, it frequently happens at the Plaza.

5. Catacombs

The collapse of ancient Airspur exposed buried caves and tunnels beneath the city, leaving them open to the air on the sides of the cliffs surrounding the bay. The genasi have repurposed nearly all these structures as they've built buildings along the cliffs. However, they left one series of caverns true to its purpose. These sprawling catacombs housed the Chessentan dead for centuries. Now they hold genasi bones.

The Catacombs remain lightly guarded at all times. Any Airspur citizen can enter them to honor the fallen, but others are discouraged. They have few visitors in any event.

The Catacombs' farthest reaches continue to be the domain of Chessenta's ancient dead. These tunnels were considered old when Airspur was under human rule. Genasi studiously avoid them, which makes the distant tunnels a perfect meeting place for criminals and dissidents to genasi rule—assuming the guards can be distracted or bought off.

The half-orcs and orcs Queen Cyndra displaced were not mere squatters; they were in fact the true heirs to Airspur. Before the Spellplague, almost a third of the Airspur's population consisted of half-orcs, and like the other citizens, they fled when destruction came. Unlike many of the other citizens, they had a

place of relative safety to turn to:the Akanapeaks. In those mountains the half-orcs allied themselves with orc tribes, and they eventually returned to the city to see what remained. Those not killed in Queen Cyndra's purge and the attack by the Abolithic Sovereignty have now returned by way of distant caves that link to the catacombs. Many now live peacefully in the city, but others still bear a grudge.

The half-orc dissidents command too few to take the city by force, and their full-blooded orc allies can't enter the city. Thus, the half-orc's leaders are attempting to make subtle inquiries into how they might profit from their situation. Of course, they can sell goods gained from the buried dead, but assaults by undead have made them wary of too much grave robbery. Ideally, the half-orcs hope to connect with someone willing to take power in the city, selling themselves and their orcs as mercenaries and then using the chaos of battle to revenge themselves on those who wronged their elders.

Adventure Hook: A half-orc necromancer who calls himself Deadtusk has emerged from the Akanapeaks through the Catacombs, leading a small army of the undead. The half-orc has swayed a number of orc and half-orc dissidents to his cause, and he plans to lead his force into Airspur, slaughtering its citizens to bolster his own forces, and ostensibly retaking the city in the name of the displaced orcs. What his half-orc followers do not know is that he secretly seeks to create a new necropolis on the bones of dead Airspur, and his plans do not include a place for the living of any sort.

6. Drakeyards

These stockyards and markets exist solely for the purpose of breeding, rearing, training, and selling drakes. The genasi brought a tradition of drake breeding with them from Abeir, and several unique species exist only in Akanûl (for now). Although hobbyists and boutique breeders do a small business in other areas of the city, the Drakeyards handle the bulk of the trade.

7. Motherhouse

The Firestorm Cabal Motherhouse consists of a structure built against the cliff and well-guarded tunnels beyond. Only the most trusted individuals enter the tunnels behind the Motherhouse.

8. Akanûl Courthouses and Virushead

This earthmote hides the Virushead deep below the Akanûl Courthouses. No one is supposed to tinker with the Virushead, so when the Steward of the Sky wants to bring in subjects for testing, she is forced to use cloak-and-dagger tactics—particularly for large monstrous creatures.

9. Cliff Prison

The Cliff Prison consists of old Chessentan dungeons in the cliffs near the Courthouses' earthmote. The genasi of Airspur despise the concept of slavery, and they seek to avoid the appearance of it by keeping the number of prisoners low and hiding those they have. Many terrible crimes are punished by death and many more are punished by banishment (with death being the sentence for return). Most individuals held in the Cliff Prison are awaiting their walk across the Bridge of Justice to their trials. Others have committed crimes small enough that a stay in prison and a fine were deemed sufficient future deterrence.

10. Akanawater Falls

The Akanawater flows from the Akanapeaks and falls down in several splashing levels to the bay. In an already beautiful city, the falls present yet another stunning vista.

MORE ABOUT AIRSPUR

If you'd like to know more about Airspur, check out Dragon #378, or you can play the RPGA adventure "The Depths of Airspur," first of a number of adventures by RPGA members that takes place in the city. You might also want to read The Restless Shore by James P. Davis. It features a genasi character who grew up in Airspur.

About the Author

Matthew Sernett has been a pizza cook, an onion packer, and an assembly line worker in a spring factory—grueling work that was surprisingly good endurance training for being the editor-in-chief of *Dragon® Magazine*. After ceding that role to others with greater fortitude, he worked as D&D designer and helped to create 4th edition.





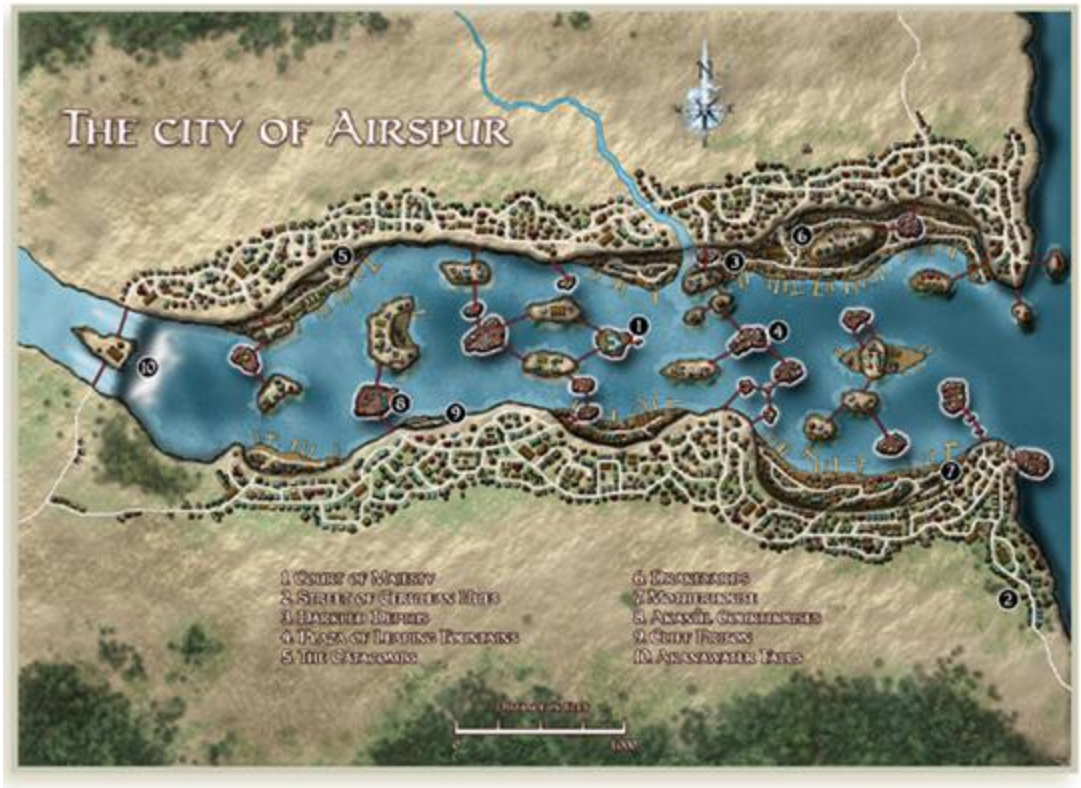
EXPLORE AIRSUPUR
AGENTS AND ENEMIES

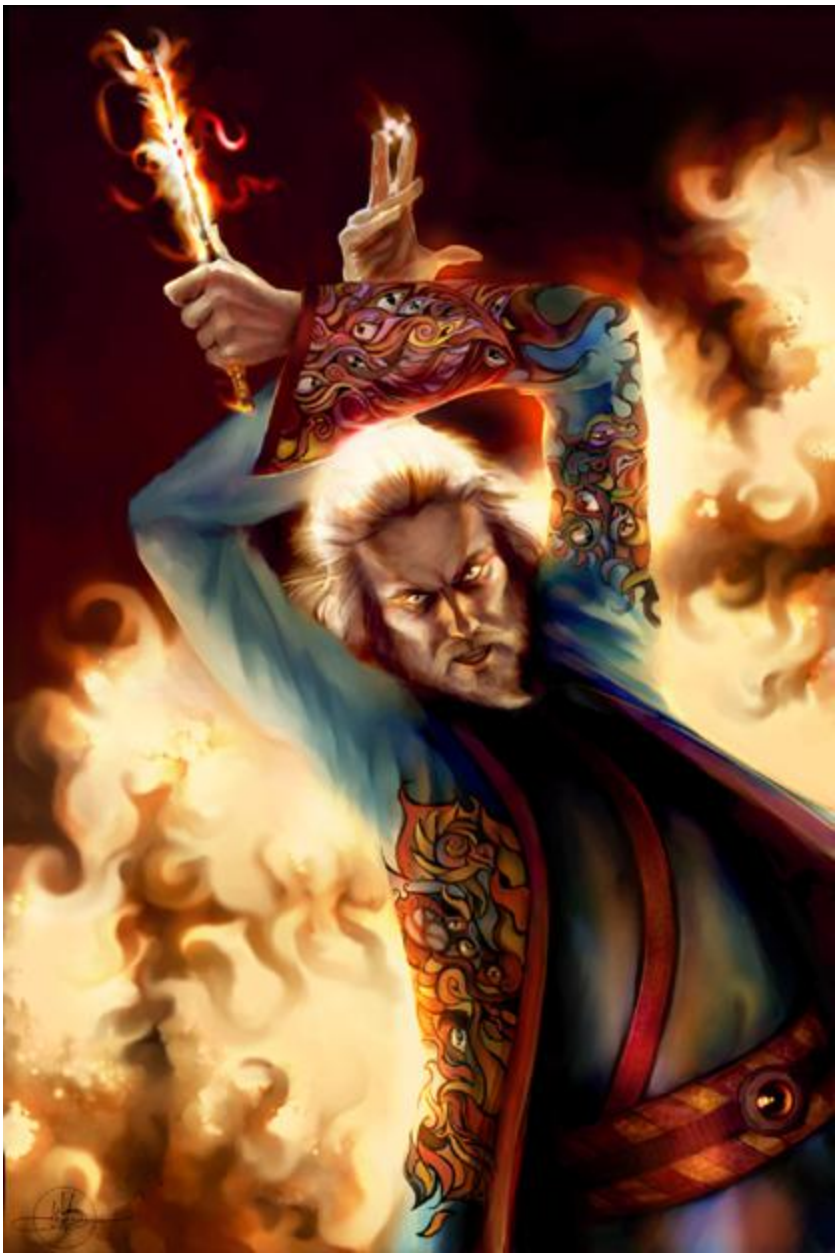
By Brian Cortijo

illustration by David Hammond and Shane Watson – Empty Room Studio cartagraphy by Sean Macdonald

All manner of interesting folk fill the streets and motes of Airspur. Among these folk are the genasi, and a myriad other races wander the roads and flying bridges of the city as well, if in lesser numbers. As with any city, one can find soldiers and merchants, criminals and adventurers. No matter how experienced a party of heroes might be when they first encounter the wondrous capital of Akanûl, the PCs can find adventure in Airspur if they look for it.

This article references locations on the Airspur city map. See “Airspur: Brightest of the Fallen Stars” in Dragon® #377 for more information about the city.


The city of Airspur



Tactics

Chevesh's insanity in no way hampers his effectiveness in combat. When threatened, he opens an encounter with *missile flurry*. He reserves his *prismatic beams* for a moment when he can affect the maximum number of targets.

Encounter Group

Although Chevesh works alone, he contacts creatures with a connection to fire, and others might find him during one of his negotiations with such creatures.

Level 15 Encounter (XP 6,500)

- ♦ Chevesh (level 15 elite artillery)
- ♦ 2 azer footsoldiers (level 14 soldier; Monster Manual, page 22)
- ♦ 1 azer taskmaster (level 16 controller; Monster Manual, page 23)
- ♦ 2 azer warriors (level 16 minion; Monster Manual, page 22)

Naibur Tinok, Servant of Shadow

The savagely enthusiastic swordmage called Naibur Tinok is the leader of a small group of Netherese agents within Airspur. Their duties are separate from those agents that directly operate from the embassy. While the official servants of Netheril work to advance trade and diplomatic relations within Akanûl, Tinok and his band operate in the shadows, looking to eliminate potential threats to Netherese interests among the genasi.

Chevesh	**Level 15 Elite Artillery**
Medium natural humanoid (fire), human	XP 2,400
Initiative +8 **Senses** Perception +10	
HP 228; **Bloodied** 114	
AC 27; **Fortitude** 25; **Reflex** 28; **Will** 28	
Resist 15 fire	
Saving Throws +2	
Speed 6	
Action Points 1	
Flame Dagger (standard; at-will) ✦ **Fire, Weapon**	
+20 vs. AC; 1d4 + 4 damage plus 2d8 fire damage.	
Flame Missile (standard; at-will) ✦ **Fire, Implement**	
Ranged 20; +20 vs. Reflex; 3d4 + 7 fire damage.	
Missile Flurry (standard; at-will)	
Chevesh makes two *flame missile* attacks.	
Lances of Flame (standard; recharge ⚄ ⚅)	
Close blast 5; targets enemies; +18 vs. Reflex; 4d6 + 6 fire damage, and Chevesh pushes the target 4 squares.	
Prismatic Beams (standard; encounter) ✦ **Fire, Poison**	
Close burst 5; targets enemies; +18 vs. Fortitude; 2d6 + 7 poison damage, and ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends). *Effect:* Chevesh makes a secondary attack. *Secondary Attack:* Close burst 5; targets enemies; +18 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 7 fire damage, and ongoing 5 fire damage (save ends).	
Body of Flame (free when a creature hits Chevesh with a melee attack; at-will)	
The triggering creature takes 10 fire damage.	
Blur (minor; encounter) ✦ **Illusion**	
Enemies 5 or more squares away from Chevesh cannot see him. *Sustain Minor:* The effect persists.	
Displacement (immediate interrupt, when an attack hits Chevesh; encounter) ✦ **Illusion**	
The attacker must reroll the attack.	
Alignment Chaotic evil	**Languages** Abyssal, Common, Primordial
Skills Arcana +18, Dungeoneering +15	
Str 14 (+9) **Dex** 12 (+8) **Wis** 16 (+10)	
Con 18 (+11) **Int** 22 (+13) **Cha** 13 (+8)	
Equipment dagger, wand	

More than anything, Tinok craves transformation into a shade in Netheril's service. Naturally pale, he dyes his hair black and dresses in dark hues, emulating the style and mannerisms of the shadar-kai—so much so that many observers cannot tell that Naibur is truly human. Although Prince Rivalen has offered to transform him into a shadarkai, the swordmage has politely declined, preferring to wait until he has earned the elevated status of a true shade, and is

invited to learn the secrets of the Netherese umbriri (*Forgotten Realms® Player's Guide*, page 67).

Tactics

Despite his formidable combat abilities, Naibur prefers to strike in ambush, taking his targets by surprise and eliminating the opportunity for them to plan a counterassault. Once he engages his foes, the swordmage attempts to set up flanking opportunities for his allies, while maintaining the mark from his *aegis of ensnarement* on the nearest defender among the PCs. If the combat becomes tense, or his allies fail to take advantage of his maneuvering, Naibur uses his *shadowstride* to leave the thick of combat, escaping if he feels that the situation can't be salvaged.

HOOK: INTRODUCING CHEVESH

To help you introduce a reclusive mage such as Chevesh as a villain in your campaign, we have a few hooks below that might assist you.

♦ The PCs track a shipment of prisoners, exotic ritual components, or *residuum* to Chevesh's home.

♦ The PCs encounter an escaped test subject running from Chevesh's laboratory, screaming in agony before being consumed by flame from within her.

♦ An enemy that the PCs slew in a previous encounter turns out to be a former subject that Chevesh was observing. Chevesh trails and confronts the PCs about their interference.

♦ The Firestorm Cabal reaches out to the PCs, pointing out Chevesh as a threat that must be eliminated—but with which the Cabal is not equipped to deal.

Encounter Group

As the leader of the small cadre of Netherese agents inside Airspur, Naibur can expect to call on them in times of conflict. Although he prefers to work alone, the capable swordmage is more than willing to accept the help of other servants of Netheril should the need arise.

Level 8 Encounter (XP 1,750)

♦ Naibur Tinok (level 7 elite soldier)

- ♦ 1 shadar-kai chainfighter (level 6 skirmisher; *Monster Manual*, page 230)
- ♦ 1 shadar-kai gloomblade (level 6 lurker; *Monster Manual*, page 230)
- ♦ 1 shadar-kai warrior (level 8 soldier; *Monster Manual*, page 231)
- ♦ 1 shadar-kai witch (level 7 controller; *Monster Manual*, page 231)



Rilta of the Rooftops

Bounding across rooftops and through the clouds themselves is Rilta, the bold and skilled burglar that makes a living stealing from Airspur's elite and wealthy visitors to the city. Although not malicious about her targets—or the wealth she takes from them—Rilta is nonetheless a proud and somewhat greedy thief who bristles at the thought of being embarrassed or beaten to a score.

Eager to take on any assignment as long as she can avoid direct violence, Rilta has spent years developing her powers of flight. She uses her *cloud hop* ability to leap off the edge of the cliffs or earthmotes of Airspur, floating harmlessly down to one of its lower surfaces to hide among the city's buildings. Rilta is a shrewd thief and is familiar enough with the weather patterns over the Akanawater to know when her attempts will merely evade pursuers, and when she will be entirely concealed by shifting cloud cover, mists, and other obstructions.

Tactics

Rilta fights for survival rather than for glory or for the rush of violence. If forced to fight at all, she prefers to knock her opponents out rather than slaying them. The moment a combat appears to turn against her, Rilta uses her *evasive flip* to avoid her attackers, and then *cloud hop* to escape. She retains her action point so that she can use an extra move action to aid in evading her enemies.

Naibur Tinok	**Level 7 Elite Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid, human	XP 600
Initiative +5 **Senses** Perception +9	
HP 156; **Bloodied** 78	
AC 23; **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 20	
Saving Throws +2	
Speed 6	
Action Points 1	
⊕ **Acidic Slash** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Acid, Weapon**	
+14 vs. AC; 1d10 + 3 acid damage.	
⚔ **Corrosive Splash** (standard; at will)	
Naibur makes two *acidic slash* attacks. If either hits, Naibur deals 3 points of acid damage to each enemy adjacent to him that he did not hit.	
⚔ **Enervating Slash** (standard; encounter) ✦ **Weapon**	
+14 vs. Fortitude; 2d10 + 4 damage. *Miss:* Half damage. *Effect:* The target is weakened (save ends).	
⚔ **Lightning Blade** (standard; encounter) ✦ **Lightning, Weapon**	
Close burst 2; targets enemies; +10 vs. Fortitude; 2d10 + 4 lightning damage.	
⚔ **Aegis of Ensnarement** (minor; at-will) ✦ **Teleportation**	
Close burst 2; targets one enemy in burst; no attack roll; the target is marked until Naibur marks another target with this power. If a target marked by this power is within 10 squares of Naibur when it hits with an attack that does not include him as a target, Naibur can use an immediate reaction after the target's entire attack is resolved to teleport the target to any space adjacent to him. In addition, the target grants combat advantage to all creatures until the end of Naibur's next turn.	
Shadowstride (move; recharge ⚅) ✦ **Illusion, Teleportation**	
Naibur teleports 6 squares and is invisible until the start of his next turn.	
Skills Arcana +12, Diplomacy +9, History +12	
Alignment Evil	**Languages** Common, Netherese, Primordial
Str 16 (+6)	**Dex** 10 (+3) **Wis** 12 (+4)
Con 14 (+5)	**Int** 19 (+7) **Cha** 13 (+4)
Equipment leather armor, bastard sword	

Tanris

Across Airspur, the merchant Crerorm, the traveling porter Queyh of Calimport, and the rumormonger Inakin are all known, if seldom mentioned. These people all are Tanris, in different guises and under different names, plying his trade among an unsuspecting populace.

Tanris is the faceless head of a nameless crime organization. None know his original name or his motivation

for causing such tumult in Airspur; they know that some folks go missing, some nobles suddenly become suspiciously silent, and certain merchants have unforeseen troubles making simple purchases. It is Tanris that causes these troubles.

Tanris was born a stormsoul genasi, but he has taken great pains to conceal his nature beneath the guise of a windsoul. Only when angered, threatened, or insulted does the stormsoul portion of his being manifest, beginning as crackling lightning that runs up and down his *szuldar* (the energy lines that mark the faces of all genasi) and culminating with the sudden emergence of crystalline growths that clearly mark him as a stormsoul.

The primary business of Tanris's enterprise is smuggling, and he has a series of warehouses across Airspur that he uses for that purpose. Tanris can also—for the appropriate price—be contracted for kidnapping, blackmail, intimidation, or fencing stolen goods. He refers any requests for burglaries to the thief, Rilta, though the young genasi has no idea from where such referrals originally stem.

Tactics

In combat, Tanris's priority is survival, not vengeance, and so he attempts to avoid damage rather than dealing it out himself. He makes liberal use of his *near or far* and *by the throat* powers, reserving his *rising storm* for when the battle turns against him and he tries to make an escape.

NETHER-WHO?

Fans of the Forgotten Realms can recognize Netheril and its plots, but newcomers or those who want to insert Naibur and his plots into non-Forgotten Realms campaigns might not have this knowledge. A primer on Netheril follows.

Netheril was an ancient empire driven by magic, and a disruption of magic brought it low when one of its archmages usurped the mantle of Mystryl, goddess of magic. A little more than a century ago, one of Netheril's flying cities returned from the planes and began rebuilding the empire. Now, Netheril and its rulers–the powerful, shadow-infused Princes of Shade–seek dominion over all the empire's former lands, as well as many countries that were never part of that vast and sprawling realm. Sembia was the first to fall to Netheril's influence, but the Princes seek nothing less than total rule–or at the very least, influence–over the entire continent.

As a result, Netherese agents work in the capitals and major cities of countless realms, pushing the empire's interests and quietly dispatching its enemies. Humans, shadar-kai, and the favored shades (*Forgotten Realms* Campaign Guide, page 260) work to quietly subvert those who would oppose them.

Any expansionist, magically powerful kingdom or empire can serve in place of Netheril; a strong connection to the Shadowfell is helpful, but by no means necessary.

For those interested, more information about the Netherese empire can be found in the Forgotten Realms *Campaign Guide*.

Encounter Group

Tanris has a number of minor genasi criminals within his enterprise. When encountered, his trio of loyal bodyguards

and the watersoul genasi mage he employs for protection surround him. The crime lord grabs an enemy at the nearest opportunity, punishing that character while his associates deal with the other PCs.

Level 11 Encounter (XP 3,250)

♦ 1 genasi hydromancer (level 8 controller; *Monster Manual 2*, page 117)

♦ 3 genasi stoneshields (level 10 soldier; *Monster Manual 2*, page 117)

♦ Tanris (level 12 elite lurker)

Tanris	**Level 12 Elite Lurker**
Medium elemental humanoid (air, water), genasi	XP 1,400
Initiative +15	**Senses** Perception +8
HP 184; **Bloodied** 92	
AC 26; **Fortitude** 22, **Reflex** 26, **Will** 24	
Saving Throws +2	
Resist 5 lightning	
Speed 6	
Action Points 1	
Dagger (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
+17 vs. AC; 1d4 + 5 damage.	
Thrown Dagger (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Ranged 10; +17 vs. AC; 1d4 + 5 damage.	
/ **Near or Far** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Tanris makes two basic attacks.	
By the Throat (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
+17 vs. AC; 1d4 + 5 damage, and the target is grabbed and takes a -2 penalty to escape checks to escape the grab.	
Close Shave (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Targets one creature grabbed by Tanris; +17 vs. AC; 3d6 + 5 damage.	
Before You Go (free action, when an enemy grabbed by Tanris escapes; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Targets the escaping enemy; +17 vs. AC; 2d4 + 5 damage.	
Rising Storm (minor; encounter) ✦ **Lightning**	
Close burst 2; +14 vs. Reflex; 2d10 lightning damage. *Effect*: Tanris gains fly 6 until the end of his next turn.	
Body Shield (opportunity, when an enemy hits or misses Tanris; must be grabbing a creature; at-will)	
Tanris takes only half damage from the hit, and the grabbed creature takes the rest. If the attack misses and deals damage on a miss, Tanris takes no damage and the grabbed enemy takes all the damage from the attack.	
Combat Advantage	
Tanris deals 1d6 extra damage against any target granting combat advantage to him.	
Skills Bluff +11, Insight +13, Stealth +16	
Alignment Evil	**Languages** Common, Primordial
Str 15 (+8)	**Dex** 20 (+11) **Wis** 14 (+8)
Con 14 (+8)	**Int** 16 (+9) **Cha** 10 (+6)
Equipment leather armor, 12 daggers	

Lairs and Threats

Not all threats to Airspur walk the streets openly; at times, one must go looking for them.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY?

Rilta is a good way to introduce a bit of ambiguity into an ongoing campaign. Although she works perfectly well as an enemy to be encountered and defeated, Rilta is best used as a sometimes-ally to the PCs, occasionally working with them, while at other times treating them as rivals or outright enemies.

No matter how long the players interact with Rilta, a big enough score might come along and she might choose to turn on them. Although she doesn't attack them outright, it's not above the young thief to leave her former allies in a dangerous situation.

Hooks to employ Rilta in a campaign include the following:

♦ Having Rilta work together with the party for a few missions, aiding them as an advance scout to gain their trust so that she can use them as a distraction to obtain an item she wishes to steal.

♦ After a short time as uneasy allies, Rilta and the PCs take missions to recover the same object. The party arrives at the location of the object, only to find that Rilta is already escaping with the loot, and they need to track her down to complete their quest.

♦ Rilta has failed in one of her missions for the dangerous crime lord Tanris, and the party needs to find her and bring Tanris proof of her death before he sends his goons after them.

♦ Trapped in an untenable situation, the PCs receive unexpected aid from Rilta, only to have her cash in the favor by requesting their help on a dangerous mission.

Rilta can also act as a replacement for a rogue or other striker PC that dies in the course of a

campaign. Rather than having the player introduce an entirely new character, Rilta's dealings with the party provide a plausible introduction—have the player create a windsoul genasi rogue (the aerialist rogue build from *Martial Power*™ is a good fit) of the party's level, and off you go!



Aboleth Den

Rumors persist of aboleth dens hidden among the waves and rocks beneath the cliff faces that make up the twin shores of Airspur. These areas are remnants of the war with the Abolethic Sovereignty half a century ago. Unfortunately,

not only do these rumors hold truth, but one such den lurks close to the Akanawater Falls. None know for sure that these aboleths exist, in part because the caves that harbor them are so well-hidden, and in part because those few genasi that have braved the caverns were transformed into the horrific creatures that now serve the aboleths.

Rilta **Level 9 Elite Skirmisher**
Medium elemental humanoid (air), genasi XP 800
Initiative +10 **Senses** Perception +10
HP 188; **Bloodied** 94
AC 23; **Fortitude** 19, **Reflex** 23, **Will** 22
Saving Throws +2
Resist 5 cold
Speed 6; see also *cloud hop*
Action Points 1

Short Sword (standard; at-will) ✦ **Cold, Weapon**
+14 vs. AC; 1d6 + 5 damage plus 1d6 cold damage, and Rilta shifts 2 squares.

Thrown Dagger (standard; at will) ✦ **Weapon**
Ranged 10; +14 vs. AC; 2d4 + 5 damage, and the target cannot make opportunity attacks until the end of Rilta's next turn.

Swiftwind Stride (standard; at-will)
Rilta makes two basic attacks.

Steel Whirlwind (standard; encounter) ✦ **Weapon**
Close burst 2; targets enemies; +12 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 5 damage, and Rilta pushes the target 1 square and knocks it prone.

Knockout Blow (standard; encounter) ✦ **Weapon**
+12 vs. Fortitude; 2d6 + 4 damage and the target is knocked unconscious (save ends). *Miss:* Half damage, and the target is dazed (save ends).

Evasive Flip (immediate reaction, when a creature flanks Rilta; recharge ⚅) ✦ **Weapon**
Rilta shifts 2 squares, which can move her through occupied squares. At the end of her movement, Rilta deals 4 damage to an adjacent enemy.

Cloud Hop (minor; recharge ⚃ ⚄ ⚅)
Until the end of her turn, Rilta gains fly 6 and can hover. If Rilta ends her turn without landing, she floats harmlessly to the ground.

Combat Advantage
Rilta deals 2d6 extra damage against any target granting combat advantage to her.

First Strike
Rilta has combat advantage against any enemy that has not yet acted in the encounter.

Alignment Unaligned **Languages** Common, Primordial
Skills Acrobatics +12, Stealth +12, Thievery +12
Str 11 (+4) **Dex** 19 (+8) **Wis** 12 (+5)
Con 14 (+6) **Int** 13 (+5) **Cha** 18 (+8)
Equipment leather armor, 2 short swords, 6 daggers

None know whether the aboleths and their servitors are the advance force of another assault by the Sovereignty, exiles from that fell kingdom, or aboleths that resided on

Toril even before the return of Abeir. What is certain is that none want to find out.

Level 17 Encounter (XP 9,850)
♦ 1 aboleth lasher (level 17 brute; *Monster Manual*, page 8)
♦ 1 aboleth overseer (level 18 elite controller; *Monster Manual*, page 8)
♦ 5 aboleth servitors (level 16 minion; *Monster Manual*, page 9)
♦ 5 abolethic skum (level 18 minion brute; *Monster Manual 2*, page 172)

Netherese Agents

Naibur Tinok and his band patrol the city, but a great many citizens of Netheril serve their nation openly as guards, scribes, and spies within and near the embassy (which rests on the large central island adjacent to the city's courthouses). Given the propensity of the Netherese to cause trouble whenever they gather in large numbers, and the almost pathological need for PCs to meddle in the affairs of shadowy kingdoms, finding a way to introduce these agents as an obstacle to the party isn't difficult. Perhaps the PCs are finding an item, creature, or person that the Princes of the Empire would like brought home for study, so the groups clash.

Alternatively, these agents might serve as a preliminary threat to the PCs, as they uncover the plots of Naibur Tinok against the interests of Airspur. An arc wherein the players confront Naibur after a few levels of dealing with his minions and allies could be a strong ongoing threat for mid-heroic-level PCs.

Level 4 Encounter (XP 900)
♦ 2 human bandits (level 2 skirmisher; *Monster Manual*, page 162)

♦ 1 human berserker (level 4 brute; *Monster Manual*, page 163)
♦ 2 human guards (level 3 soldier; *Monster Manual*, page 162)
♦ 1 human mage (level 4 artillery; *Monster Manual*, page 163)

Tanris's Warehouse

Despite having no name, Tanris's criminal enterprise has a highly organized structure, with warehouses around the city for smuggling of goods, hiding fugitives, and keeping kidnapped or killed victims until they can be properly disposed. Tanris is not thoroughly involved in the dealings of some of these warehouses, preferring to keep out of the daily operations of those of his employees he can trust to make him coin.

Tanris keeps his most capable "workers" just outside the city, farther along the shore. This allows him to store his most sensitive materiel without being noticed by authorities —and to keep the number of prying eyes and ears quiet when the inevitable conflict (and the ensuing cries of battle) erupts.

Level 10 Encounter (XP 2,950)
♦ 1 dragonborn gladiator (level 10 soldier; *Monster Manual*, page 86)
♦ 1 drow warrior (level 11 lurker; *Monster Manual*, page 94)
♦ 1 duergar hellcaller (level 12 artillery; *Monster Manual 2*, page 94)
♦ 1 gnome wolverine (level 9 skirmisher; *Monster Manual 2*, page 129)
♦ 5 ogre thugs (level 11 minion; *Monster Manual*, page 198)

About the Author

Brian Cortijo is a freelance designer and full-time university lackey—which means he looks at the college equivalent of character sheets all day. He's undergoing a homecoming of sorts, making his return to the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting (since *DRAGON* #358) after short hiatus on other worlds, including an extended stay in his birth-city of New York. Some of his recent works include *Forgotten Heroes: Scythe and Shroud* and *Qadira: Gateway to the East*.



EXPLORE AIRSPUR
Villains and Vagabonds

by Matt James

illustration by Wayne England cartography by Jared Blando

The beauty and majesty of Airspur is rivaled by none with its colorful hues and gentle flowing water beneath breathtaking earth motes. It is that which stirs underneath the calm facade of this genasi city that brings the unseen, let alone understood, and the uncertainty of the night. As with each city in Faerün, there is always another side; one that many choose to ignore or are simply too afraid to acknowledge.

ALYSHEX, WEAPONS DEALER

Innocuously found within the city of Airspur is an eager yet cautious purveyor of weaponry; a querulous half-orc female

by the name of Alyshex. This local merchant is as beautiful as she is unscrupulous and is always looking out for herself. Alyshex is a direct descendant of Khrulus, the previous leader of Airspur before the Spellplague brought the hordes of genasi refugees to the region.

Tactics

Alyshex is intelligent and not beneath doing anything to get her way. Though she is somewhat capable of defending herself, she often uses local thugs to do the heavy lifting in combat.

Encounter Group

Alyshex rarely travels anywhere without an entourage of goons at her side.

Level 3 Encounter (XP 300)

♦ Alyshex (level 3 artillery)

♦ 4 human gang members (level 1 minion, *Forgotten Realms® Campaign Guide*, page 31)

♦ 2 human bandits (level 2 skirmisher, *Monster Manual®*, page 162)

Hook: Introducing Alyshex

Alyshex often seeks out fledgling adventurers who appear easy to influence.

Alyshex is an unknown political threat to the government of Airspur. While she has not explicitly gone out of her way to cause trouble, she is always looking for a way to usurp power.

The local magistrate offers to pay the characters to investigate criminal activity within Airspur relating to events surrounding Alyshex.

Alyshex **Level 3 Artillery**
Medium natural humanoid, half-orc XP 150

Initiative +3 **Senses** Perception +3
HP 35; **Bloodied** 17
AC 15; **Fortitude** 15, **Reflex** 16, **Will** 15
Speed 6

Skewer (standard; at-will)✦ **Weapon**
+10 vs. AC; 1d6 + 3 damage.

Ice Ray (standard; at-will) ✦ **Cold**
Ranged 20; +8 vs. Reflex; 1d10 + 3 cold damage and the target is slowed (save ends).

Storm of Energy (standard; recharge ⚄ ⚅) ✦ **Lightning**
Ranged 10; +8 vs. Fortitude; 1d10 + 3 lightning damage and the target is dazed (save ends).

Shield (immediate interrupt; encounter)
Alyshex gains +4 to AC and Reflex until the end of her next turn.

Alignment Unaligned **Languages** Common, Giant

Str 14 (+3)	**Dex** 17 (+4)	**Wis** 11 (+1)
Con 11 (+1)	**Int** 14 (+3)	**Cha** 11 (+1)

Equipment short sword

Regional Backg round: Airspur

Airspur is the most powerful mercantile hub in all of Akanül and the ruling city of the region. Though the population is primarily Genasi, most other races can be found within.

Benefit: +2 bonus to acrobatics and diplomacy.

Kevrick, Vistani Elder

This vagabond is an Elder amongst the Vistani, a nomadic people who travel in caravans across the known world and beyond. Kevrick is not inherently evil, but he is not good, either. Kevrick always takes advantage of any situation and will go to great lengths to ensure that he ends up with the better end of the deal.

Tactics

Kevrick prefers to strike with surprise if at all possible, gaining as much of an advantage as possible. He will usually single out one opponent while using his *evil eye of the Vistani* power to keep others away.

Encounter Group

Though Kevrick does travel alone from time to time, he usually has an entourage of friends and family following him around.

Level 15 Encounter (XP 6,400)

♦ Kevrick (level 15 elite skirmisher)
♦ 4 human snipers (level 12 lurker, *Dungeon* 158)
♦ 4 human soldier minions (level 15 minion, *Dungeon* 158)

Hook: Introducing Kevrick

Kevrick likes to play pranks on people. Though most of these pranks are harmless, he doesn't mind angering someone for his own enjoyment.

Kevrick is always keen on enterprises that will bring more wealth to his pockets. Anytime the characters stand to earn money, he could show up with a proposal.

The characters are ambushed within the city and robbed by Kevrick and his companions.

After being arrested for thievery, Kevrick has performed a daring escape. The characters are hired to track him down and bring him to justice.

The local magistrate is interested in having the characters investigate illicit activities that Kevrick has been alleged to be involved in.



Kevrick	**Level 15 Elite Skirmisher**
Medium natural humanoid	XP 2,400
Initiative +21	**Senses** Perception +10
HP 292; **Bloodied** 146	
AC 29; **Fortitude** 26, **Reflex** 28, **Will** 28	
Saving Throws +2	
Speed 6	
Action Points 1	
Slashing Feint (standard; at-will) ✦ **Martial**	
+20 vs. AC; 2d8 + 6 damage and Kevrick can shift 1 square (4d8 + 22 damage on critical hit).	
Double Attack (standard; at-will) ✦ **Melee**	
Kevrick makes two *slashing feint* attacks.	
Off-Hand Pierce (minor 1/round; at-will) ✦ **Martial**	
+18 vs. Reflex; 1d10 + 6 damage (2d10 + 16 damage on critical hit).	
Crossbow (standard; at-will) ✦ **Ranged**	
Ranged 10; +20 vs. AC; 1d10 + 6 damage.	
Evil Eye of the Vistani (minor; recharge ⚄ ⚅) ✦ **Ranged**	
Ranged 10; +18 vs. Will; until the end of Kevrick's next turn, the target grants combat advantage and cannot willingly move closer to Kevrick.	
Deadly Aim (standard; encounter) ✦ **Ranged**	
Ranged 10; +18 vs. Reflex; 4d10 + 6 damage and the target is stunned (save ends).	
Deadly Repercussions (standard; encounter) ✦ **Implement, Psychic**	
Close burst 2; +18 vs. Will; 3d8 + 8 psychic damage. The target grants combat advantage and has ongoing 10 damage (save ends both). Until the target saves against this effect, once each turn when the target hits an ally roll 1d6; the target takes a penalty to saving throws equal to the result until the end of Kevrick's next turn.	
Alignment Unaligned	**Languages** Common, Elven
Str 16 (+10)	**Dex** 20 (+12) **Wis** 20 (+12)
Con 18 (+11)	**Int** 15 (+9) **Cha** 12 (+8)
Equipment leather armor, scimitar, dagger, crossbow, pouch with 20 bolts	

VALSHELAR: TRAITOR OF AIRSPUR

Valshelar is a Genasi agent of the Netherese, recruited because he is native to the city. He is tasked with infiltrating the inner circles of the Airspur government. While his overall role is small, it is not uncommon for the Shadovar to deploy such agents for their own needs.

Tactics

Valshelar stalks his opposition from the shadows and uses terrain to his advantage. If actively hunting someone, he will use his *dart spray* ability to slow his opposition and keep them from getting away. If being hunted by the law (or

others), he will use the same attack as a means to slow them while he gets away.

Encounter Group

Valshelar never travels alone; he always has thugs nearby.

Level 2 Encounter (XP 600)
♦ Valshelar (level 2 elite lurker)
♦ 4 human thugs (level 1 minion, *Dungeon 155*)
♦ 2 human ruffians (level 2 skirmisher, *Dungeon 155*)

Hook: Shadovar Infiltration

Valshelar is an easy NPC to introduce into your players' exploits in the city of Airspur. Whether he is involved in an elaborate political scheme or characters have the "simple" task of hunting him down, Valshelar provides nearly limitless possibilities to a young group of adventurers.

Valshelar	**Level 2 Elite Lurker**
Medium elemental humanoid (genasi, water)	XP 250
Initiative +8	**Senses** Perception +6; tremorsense
HP 58; **Bloodied** 29	
AC 16; **Fortitude** 13, **Reflex** 15, **Will** 14	
Saving Throws +2	
Speed 6	
Action Points 1	
⊕ **Piercing Thrust** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Martial, Weapon**	
+7 vs. AC; 1d6 + 3 damage (1d6 +9 damage on critical hit).	
⸸ **Double Attack** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Valshelar makes two *piercing thrust* attacks.	
⸸ **Counter** (immediate reaction; recharge ⚄ ⚅) ✦ **Weapon**	
When hit with a melee attack; +7 vs. AC; 1d10 +3 damage (1d10 + 9 damage on critical hit) and the target is dazed (save ends).	
⌖ **Dart Spray** (standard; encounter) ✦ **Weapon**	
Close blast 3; targets enemies; +5 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 3 damage and the target is slowed (save ends).	
Alignment Evil	**Languages** Common, Primordial
Str 8 (+0)	**Dex** 20 (+6) **Wis** 11 (+1)
Con 11 (+1)	**Int** 11 (+1) **Cha** 17 (+4)
Equipment hide armor, katar, satchel with 6 darts	

LONG-TERM PLOT DEVICE

Valshelar is a great NPC to introduce long-term campaign plotlines. Though he may seem too low-level to be involved with high-level shenanigans, he could be precisely what is needed to set things in motion in whatever direction you wish.

AZARDS AND HIDEAWAYS

Fortune comes only to those willing to risk life and limb. What thrills are to be sought in the majesty of Airspur? What is hidden behind Akanawater Falls that requires magical protection?

Akanawater Falls

One of the most beautiful sites (or sights) in all of Faerün is the breathtaking, raw power of the Akanawater Falls. Those who have been fortunate enough to explore this treasure have rarely been disappointed. The crystal-clear water pours down in a vortex of swirls that can leave one deafened by its moiling roar. What is mostly unknown is that which lies below; the entrance to an elaborate labyrinth that leads to the Sepulcher of the Goblin Baron.

Optional Encounter

The labyrinth leading to the sepulcher provides excellent opportunities for additional skill challenges and combat encounters. Any subterranean creature would fit well in this situation, according to party level.
Skill Challenge: “Akanawater Falls,” page 103.

SEPULCHER OF THE GOBLIN BARON

Hidden deep within the recesses below Akanawater Falls is an underwater entrance to a secret goblin hideout. Fresh air is abundant here, thanks to tiny natural vents leading to the surface, making this the perfect lair for these miscreants. Long ago, an enterprising goblin literally stumbled into this location and recognized its value. He recruited others to help in his devious plans to rob merchant ships in the area surrounding Airspur. These goblins are a major nuisance in the area, but they’ve never been caught—because no one can find their lair. The Firestorm Cabal has branded the leader as “the Goblin Baron” for his ability to plan and lead these raids.

Adventurers may find clues to the sepulcher’s location in old documents or early accounts of the area, through rituals, by interrogating goblins, or by

talking to the very seediest characters in town—the sorts that most people avoid like the plague.

When the characters arrive at the entrance of the cave, read:
The dank smell of rotting fish permeates the cave entrance.
Though it is dark within, you can make out a slight flickering of light.
Tactical Encounter: “Sepulcher of the Goblin Baron”, page 104.

SCALE THE ENCOUNTER

A current DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® *Insider* subscription affords players and dungeon masters alike the opportunity to access the new DM tools. Among them is the D&D Monster Builder, a tool that allows a DM to adjust the level and power of monsters. If your characters are above the recommended level for any of these encounters, use this tool to adjust accordingly. This saves you time while ensuring that characters are sufficiently challenged by the monsters.

A1: AKANAWATER FALLS

Encounter Level 2 (625 XP)
Seething below and to the west of the city of Airspur is the turbulent water of Akanawater Falls. Rituals have been worked on the falls to increase their intensity, chiefly as a means to drive underwater turbines which power the city’s large granaries. Creatures trying to dive beneath the falls can find themselves dragged into a maelstrom and unexpected machinery.

Secrets of Akanawater Falls

It is necessary for the characters to traverse the Akanawater Falls in order to reach the sepulcher of the goblin baron. Brute strength need not be the only means of overcoming this turbulent place; wits are also required if one is to survive.

Level: 2 (375 XP).
Complexity: 3 (requires 8 successes before 3 failures).
Primary Skills: Athletics, Arcana, Insight, Nature.

Athletics (DC 15): Knowing that these situations can be grave, you use brute strength to swim through the raging water and strong currents. This skill can be used to gain any number of successes in this challenge.

Arcana (DC 15): The character senses the magical influences that Airspur deployed to increase the flow of water in this area and uses that information to find a path to safety. This skill can be used to gain a maximum of 2 successes in this challenge.

Insight (DC 10): The character identifies the mechanical portions of the turbines and is able to avoid their sweeping blades. This skill can be used to gain a maximum of 1 success in this challenge.

Nature (DC 10): The character has had prior experience with waterfalls and understands how currents work beneath them. Using this knowledge lets the character follow the safest course through the treacherous eddies. This skill can be used to gain any number of successes in this challenge.

Success: The party successfully navigates to the entrance of the Sepulcher of the Goblin Baron.

Failure: The characters are tossed by the currents and waves beneath the waterfall and dashed back onto the shore. Each character who participated in the skill challenge loses two healing surges, then characters can try again if they desire.



A2: SEPULCHER OF THE GOBLIN BARON

Encounter Level 2 (650 XP)

♦ Goblin underboss (U)
♦ 2 goblin blackblades (B)
♦ 4 goblin cutters (C)

Setup

This encounter takes place in a watery grotto tucked well behind the Akanawater Falls in the city of Airspur. The goblins use the grotto to store treasures that have been pilfered over the years. The natural structure and location of this cavern make it an ideal place for any vagabond to stow his loot.

When the characters first enter the sepulcher, read:
The strong stench of garbage and refuge permeates the humid air and fills your mouth with a bitter taste. A soft yellow glow emanates from some sort of natural fungi that to grows in the area.

Goblin Cutter (C) **Level 1 Minion**
Small natural humanoid (goblin) XP 25
Initiative +3 **Senses** Perception +1; low-light vision
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion
AC 16; **Fortitude** 12, **Reflex** 14, **Will** 11
Speed 6
(+) **Short Sword** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**
+6 vs. AC; 4 damage (5 damage if the goblin cutter has combat advantage against the target).
Goblin Tactics (immediate reaction, when missed by a melee attack; at-will)
The goblin shifts 1 square.
Alignment Evil **Languages** Common, Goblin
Skills Stealth +10, Thievery +10
Str 14 (+2) **Dex** 17 (+3) **Wis** 12 (+1)
Con 13 (+1) **Int** 8 (-1) **Cha** 8 (-1)
Equipment leather armor, short sword

Goblin Blackblade (B) **Level 1 Lurker**
Small natural humanoid (goblin) XP 100
Initiative +7 **Senses** Perception +1; low-light vision
HP 25; **Bloodied** 12
AC 16; **Fortitude** 12, **Reflex** 14, **Will** 11
Speed 6
(+) **Short Sword** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**
+5 vs. AC; 1d6 + 2 damage.
Combat Advantage
The goblin blackblade deals an extra 1d6 damage against any target it has combat advantage against.
Goblin Tactics (immediate reaction, when missed by a melee attack; at-will)
The goblin shifts 1 square.
Sneaky
When shifting, a goblin blackblade can move into a space occupied by an ally of its level or lower. The ally shifts into the blackblade's previous space as a free action.
Alignment Evil **Languages** Common, Goblin
Skills Stealth +10, Thievery +10
Str 14 (+2) **Dex** 17 (+3) **Wis** 12 (+1)
Con 13 (+1) **Int** 8 (-1) **Cha** 8 (-1)
Equipment leather armor, short sword

Goblin Underboss (U) **Level 4 Elite Controller (Leader)**
Small natural humanoid (goblin) XP 350
Initiative +4 **Senses** Perception +8; low-light vision
HP 110; **Bloodied** 55
AC 18; **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 15, **Will** 16
Speed 5
(+) **Short Sword** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**
+9 vs. AC; 1d6 + 4 damage. *Miss:* An adjacent ally makes a free basic attack.
Superior Goblin Tactics (immediate reaction, when missed by a melee attack; at-will)
The goblin underboss and up to two allies within its line of sight shift 1 square.
Survival Instinct
The goblin underboss gains a +3 bonus to defenses while bloodied.
Alignment Evil **Languages** Common, Goblin
Skills Stealth +10, Thievery +10
Str 18 (+6) **Dex** 14 (+5) **Wis** 13 (+3)
Con 15 (+4) **Int** 11 (+2) **Cha** 16 (+5)
Equipment chainmail, short sword

About the Author

When not writing for DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®, Matt is chained to his desk working endlessly on developing his website, Loremaster (http://www.loremaster.org). You can also follow Matt's gaming insights at www.twitter.com/matt_james_fr.



From the molten core of a dead universe

Hunger

Spills a seed of evil

Fury

So pure, so concentrated, so infectious

Hate

Its corruption will span worlds

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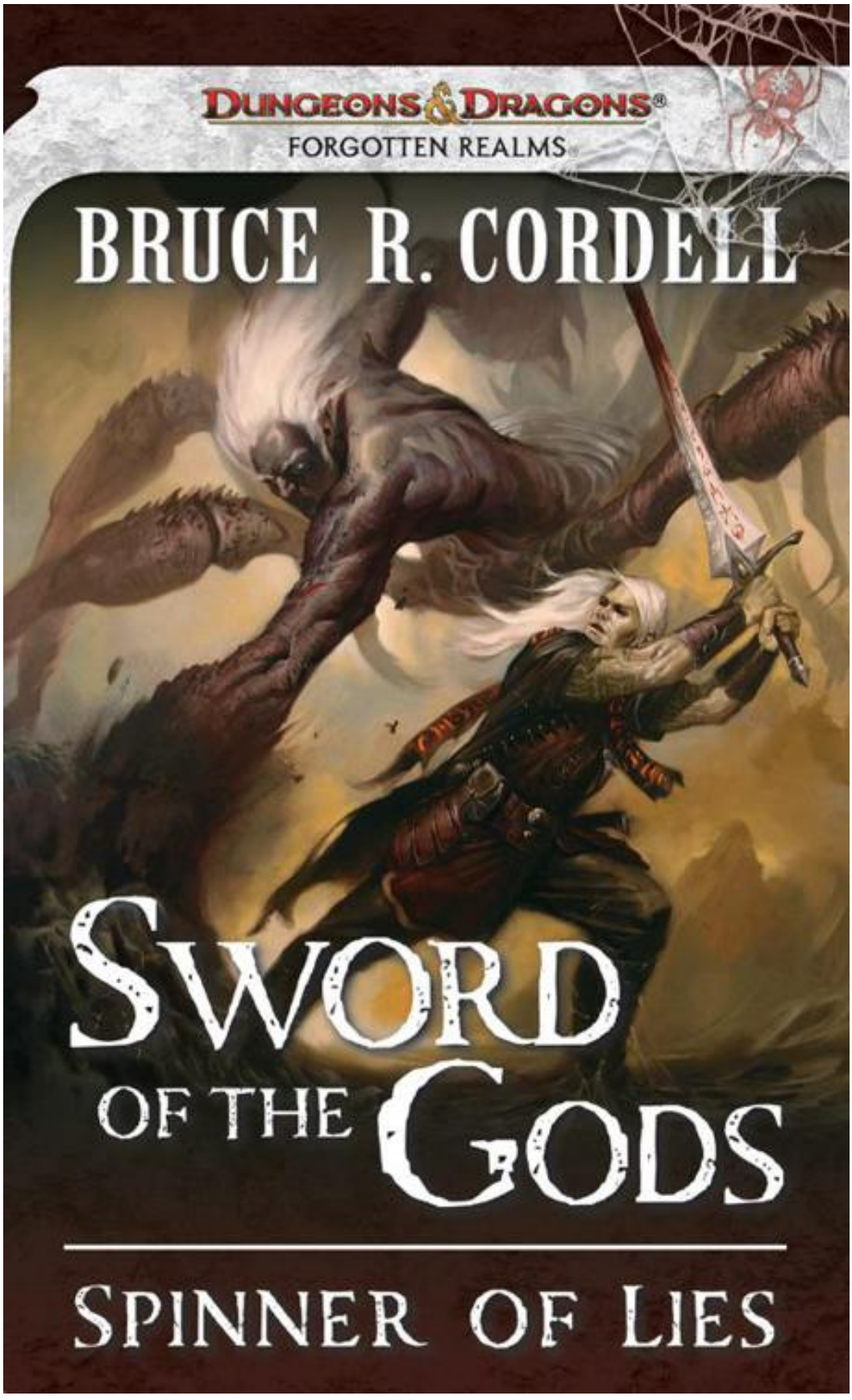


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